

**THE CUMMERAGUNJA WALK-OFF: A STUDY OF BLACK/WHITE
POLITICS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT RACE, IDEOLOGY AND
PLACE ON THE EVE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR.**

Submitted by

Michael Victor Ward
42850576
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Macquarie University

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Department of Modern History
Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University
New South Wales
Australia

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

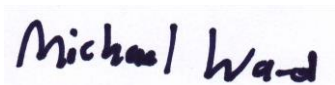
In 1939 some 200 Aboriginal people walked off the Cummeragunja Station on the NSW-Victoria border in protest over decades of mistreatment and abuse at the hands of the NSW Protection bureaucracy. Aboriginal protest was not new by the late 1930s but the social and political landscape had significantly shifted. In particular the media was more receptive, the white supporters of the Aborigines had grown in numbers and the Aboriginal political presence had grown in size, range and force. Not only did the protesters take the novel approach of crossing the Murray River from NSW and camping on the other side, they developed considerable momentum, utilising the media to spread the word, and marshalled significant support from cross-sections of the community at large. Although the bureaucracy was successful in ending the protest, it was a pyrrhic victory and confronted them with a choice: they could either pursue the responses of old or adapt to maintain control in the new political landscape. By exploring these disparate forces, this thesis argues that the Cummeragunja walk-off was a particular kind of protest at a particular point in time. In the end it did not achieve what the protesters hoped it would. However, it helped to shift the Australian conscience on Indigenous issues and created a strong Indigenous legacy lasting to this day.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- This thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.
- Due acknowledgement has been made in the thesis to all other material used.
- The work of others has been utilised within the rules and requirements of the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Ward". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Date: 10/10/2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of many people inside and outside of Macquarie University, the most significant of which is my supervisor, Dr. Alison Holland, without whose aid this thesis would not have been possible. I cannot say enough about her helping me to finish this project and for having the patience of a saint in assisting me by reading over the many re-writes until a final draft was ready, and importantly encouraging me into having that key argument in the thesis. I would also like to thank the staff of the Macquarie University Library, who constantly assisted me in discovering, and providing me with, the all-important material for this project.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAL (Australian Aborigines' League)
AAPA (Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association)
ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)
ACT (Australian Capital Territory)
ADB (Australian Dictionary of Biography)
AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)
ANA (Australian Natives' Association)
APA (Aborigines' Progressive Association)
APB (Aborigines' Protection Board)
APNR (Association for the Protection of Native Races)
AWB (Aborigines' Welfare Board)
AWU (Australian Workers' Union)
CPA (Communist Party of Australia)
MHR (Member of the House of Representatives)
MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly)
NSW (New South Wales)
USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)

PROLOGUE

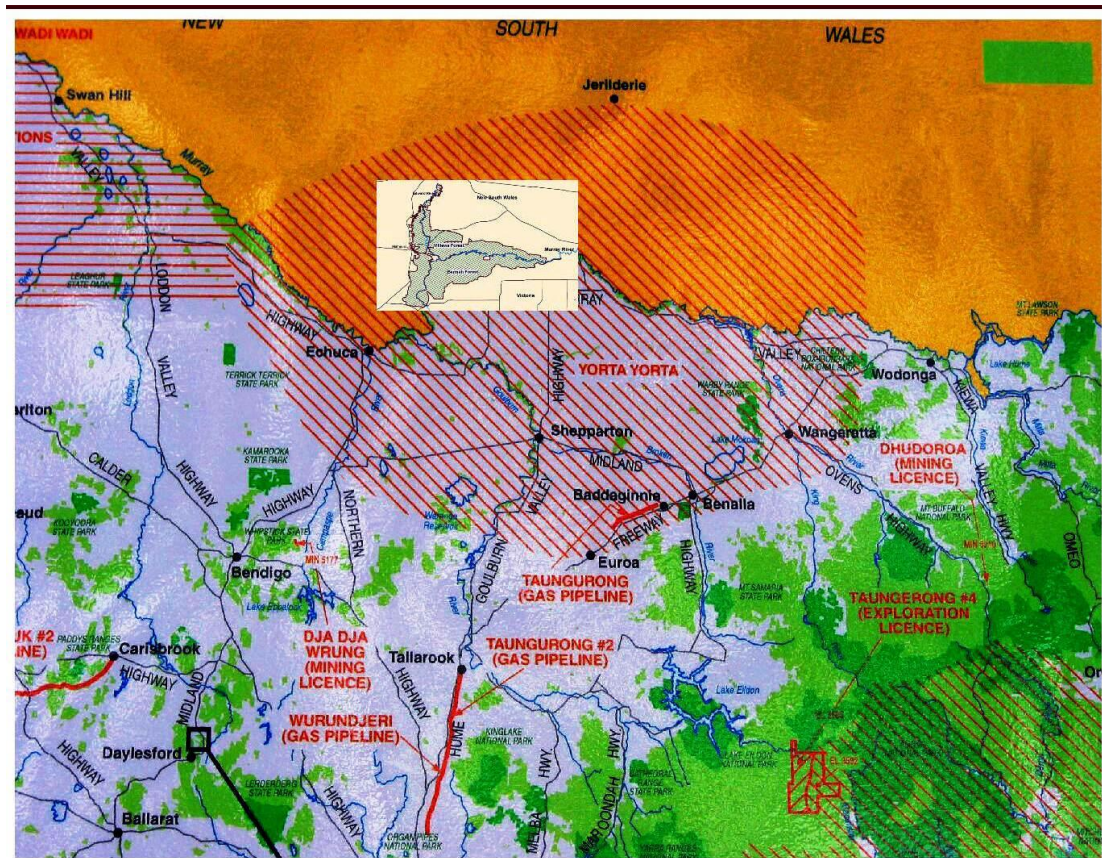
In February 1939, two-thirds of the Aboriginal residents* of Cummeragunja, a station on the NSW side of the Murray River, which was established for Aboriginals during the 1880s, walked off in protest at their living conditions and the authoritarian manager, Arthur James McQuiggan. They crossed the Murray River into Victoria and settled around Barmah, stating they would not return until their demands for improvement of the station were met. The walk-off lasted on and off for nine months. In effect, there were two walk-offs. The residents returned, briefly, for five weeks before leaving again when their demands were not met and, worse, when they were punished for leaving in the first place. In the end many never returned. In the face of institutional intransigence, they settled elsewhere in Victoria and NSW, maintaining a connection to a place and a river for which they had had a connection for thousands of years.

In this way, they ultimately won what they wanted: their freedom. They also turned the minds of many settler Australians to their plight. The protest was the first 'mass' political protest of its kind and it marked a turning point in cross-cultural political alliance which continued to be a feature of Aboriginal resistance into the twentieth century.

* The descendants of the original ancestors of the land surrounding the Murray River identify as Yorta Yorta-Bangerang. The majority of them identify as Yorta Yorta. Wayne Atkinson used Yorta Yorta for the purpose of discussion and their collective relationship when describing the traditional inhabitants.¹ This thesis will use the term Yorta Yorta as well.

¹ Wayne Atkinson, "Ngariarty: Speaking Strong; 6 The Schools of Human Experience," in *First Australians: an illustrated history*, ed. Rachel Perkins, Marcia Langton, Wayne Atkinson, James Boyce, R.G. Kimber, Steve Kinnane, Noel Loos and Bruce Pascoe (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2010), p. 185, 269.

MAP OF THE YORTA YORTA NATION



In the top-middle of the picture is a diagonally shaded area, which represents the boundary of what is known as the Yorta Yorta nation. The Murray River runs through the middle of the Yorta Yorta nation and since the mid-eighteenth century has served as a physical border between NSW and Victoria. The location of Cummeragunja Station is shown by the overlaid cream and light green map.¹

¹ Image taken from "National Parks, Joint Management & Land Justice," Oncountry Learning Site:Yorta Yorta Forest-Wetlands, available from <https://waynera.wordpress.com/national-parks-joint-management-land-justice/>

INTRODUCTION

By the time the Cummergunja residents undertook their dramatic protest, Aboriginal protest across the south-east, had reached critical levels. It was particularly noticeable in New South Wales where critique of the operation of the Aborigines' Protection Board, the key bureaucratic body overseeing Aboriginal lives, was at an all time high. State-sanctioned protection of Aboriginal people had evolved from the late nineteenth century but by the first decades of the twentieth century, the state was intruding ever more insidiously in Aboriginal people's lives. Through the protection laws and the bureaucracies which administered them, the state controlled most aspects of Aboriginal people's lives and had overseen the removal of children and loss of land over several years. In the face of this intrusion and dictatorship Aboriginal people stood up and resisted, increasingly styling protection, 'destruction'.

Nowhere did this have more relevance than at Cummeragunja. The Aborigines' Protection Board had been overseeing Aboriginal people there since the late 1880s. Although the station had initially thrived – it was a model industrial station – by the 1930s, with the onset of the great depression, conditions were very poor. Much of this had to do with a lack of finance and infrastructure but it also related to the Board's management of the station. While the bureaucracy intruded more into Aboriginal people's lives by the 1930s, clashes and disagreements between the residents and various managers increased. The most notorious manager to be employed was Arthur James McQuiggan (from mid-1937 to early 1940), who, instead of addressing the residents' significant concerns, proved to be an authoritarian and dictatorial figure.

While the walk-off was symptomatic of this mounting Aboriginal resistance and the broader climate of unease, it was also unique. In what seemed like a sudden and protracted event, the protest forced the government's hand. Not only were politicians forced to respond but the event brought together criticisms and interjections from a wide cross-section of Australian society in support of the protest, including students, unionists, Christian groups and communists. It is also

notable that the media was more receptive to the cause, providing widespread coverage in Australia and overseas.

This thesis explores key aspects of this protest and the wider response to the walk-off in the context of both the Aborigines own lives and the wider social and political climate. It is notable that Aboriginal people had long campaigned about their conditions but they had largely done so up to this point using essentially private means: lobbying friends, writing letters to politicians and bureaucrats and petitioning. Yet throughout the 1930s we see development in their politicking. They formed their own groups, the Victorian-based Australian Aborigines' League (AAL), formed in 1934 being most critical to the Cummeragunja story. And they were learning the power of public protest, utilising both their wider networks and the press to stake their claims. The Cummeragunja walk-off was one such public political protest.

In this thesis I show that part of the reason for its prominence in Aboriginal memory and increasingly in public memory is the power of place in shaping the protest and its legacy. The protesters were joined by a number of influential former residents, people associated with the site/country from birth, who 'came back' to support the cause, bringing with them new political alliances and methods. It was through these groups that Aboriginal activists managed to force the bureaucracy's hand. The protest ended in 'failure' in the sense that many Aboriginal people never returned to Cummeragunja and the bureaucracy did not concede to their demands. Yet, in the face of unprecedented critique and resistance across the New South Wales Aboriginal community, and particularly at Cummeragunja, the bureaucracy was in crisis on the eve of the Second World War. The fact is that Cummeragunja forced the bureaucracy to face a difficult reality: they either needed to reform or fade away.

Over the past three decades the walk-off has been quite heavily historicised and the historiography is quite diverse in terms of its range and approaches. In fact, it has a much longer lineage still, if we factor in the important early works of Aboriginal biography, which have evolved over the last sixty years. These have

been written by individuals who were involved in the walk-off or witnessed it or were in some way connected to it, through family, region or through a history of Aboriginal resistance in Victoria. Biography marked a change in Aboriginal memory as the written document was used to record their life stories rather than only passing it down through the oral tradition.

One of the first accounts of the walk-off was Theresa Clements's account in *From Old Maloga: The memoirs of an aboriginal woman*, which emerged in the 1940s.¹ Only a few years later, Ronald Morgan's 1952 autobiography, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunja and its Aboriginal People*, was published.² Remembered as a proud Yorta Yorta man and an avid writer, Morgan was also a resident of Cummeragunja and his reminiscence is a personal narrative about the history of the station through his experiences and that of his parents.³ Morgan reflected on the walk-off with a sense of disappointment as the Station never returned to its former glory.⁴ It is testament to the hold of the Cummeragunja story on Indigenous people that it took on new life with the appearance of the re-emergent Aboriginal activism (and its myriad white supporters) associated with the era of social protest in the 1960s and 1970s.

Even before the key works of Aboriginal history were to emerge at the end of this period, the Cummeragunja story figured in two key sociological accounts: E.G. Docker's *Simply Human Beings* and Diane Barwick's study of Victorian Aboriginal struggles for economic independence.⁵ Docker's book placed Cummeragunja in the wider history of Aboriginal reserves and stations which were created across NSW and Victoria to remove and ultimately segregate Aboriginal Australians. Out of sight and mind of the white majority they were frequently sites of abuse and mistreatment. Barwick's early work on

¹ Theresa Clements, *From Old Maloga: The memoirs of an aboriginal woman* (Pahran: Fraser & Morphet, 1940s), p. 1-8.

² Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunja and its Aboriginal People* (Fitzroy: Fotoscreen Process Printers, 1952), p. 16-19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1-24. & George Nelson and Robynne Nelson, *Dharmalan Dana: An Australian Aboriginal man's 73-year search for the story of his Aboriginal and Indian ancestors* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), p. 306-307.

Morgan's parents Bagot Morgan and Elizabeth Walker were born in the mid-eighteenth century in the Riverina area and had built a life on Stations that was different from their tribal parents. However both did not live to witness the protest with Elizabeth dying in 1926 and Bagot died in 1934.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

⁵ Diane Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga: Pioneers and Policy," in *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development*, ed. T. Scarlett Epstein and D.H. Penny (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1972), p. 11-18. & E. G. Docker, *Simply Human Beings* (Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press, 1964), p. 165.

Cummeragunja was part of a larger academic interest in the Victorian Aboriginal community. An anthropologist, based at the Australian National University, she made a special study of the various Victorian clans and Cummeragunja station was notable as a place which had, at one point, demonstrated the capacity of independent economic activity on the part of the Aboriginal residents.

Around the same time two other key works of biography were published about two prominent Aboriginal leaders who had knowledge of and/or were involved in the walk-off. In 1965 Mavis Thorpe Clark, herself a Victorian Aboriginal with knowledge of the walk-off, published the book *Pastor Doug: The Story of an Aboriginal Leader*.⁶ It explored the life of influential Aboriginal figure Douglas 'Doug' Nicholls (1906-1988).⁷ Throughout the 1930s Nicholls was a successful AFL player in Melbourne and a champion of Aboriginal rights, who supported the Cummeragunja protesters.⁸ Clark described the walk-off and reasons behind it, as well as how it affected Nicholls' family.⁹ Clark also wrote a shorter biography of Nicholls's life in 1979 called *The Boy From Cumeroogunga*, which also included a chapter on the walk-off.¹⁰ The other key biography was Jack Horner's book *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, published in 1974.¹¹ This book focuses on the life of Aboriginal activist William Ferguson (1882-1950) who was a trade unionist, politician and joint leader of the *Aborigines' Progressive Association* (APA), the leading NSW-based Aboriginal civil rights organisation of the interwar period.¹² Although Ferguson was not an active supporter of the walk-off, it is important to reference him in order to demonstrate the differences between activists and to point out that Aboriginal politics was as varied as the people

⁶ Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of an Aboriginal Leader* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1965), p. 105-118. Clark published a new edition in 1972, which covered the developments and more recent aspects of Doug Nicholls's life, importantly his Knighthood. It was called *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls Aboriginal Leader*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12. & Richard Broome, 'Nicholls, Sir Douglas Ralph (Doug) (1906-1988)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 18, (MUP, 2012), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>. Nicholls was born at Cummeragunja and a Yorta Yorta man like Morgan. Nicholls was also still alive when the biography was published.

⁸ Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 105-118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112-116. Clark described the walk-off as a gamble but had to act against the mistreatment by the manager and declining standards of living. Clark stated although most left in protest, a few remained, which led to hostility between the families and weakened their collective strength. The legacy of the walk-off is also covered by Clark where she stated it was the beginning of the break up of Cummeragunja. It led to the APB being reformed. Clarke concludes by describing the legacy of the walk-off with many former residents making a new life in Victoria with the older residents building a good life utilising their farming skills, while some of the younger ones found life hard, turning to drink and prostitution.

¹⁰ Mavis Thorpe Clark, *The Boy From Cumeroogunga* (Sydney, Auckland, London, Toronto: Hodder and Soughton, 1979), p. 111-115.

¹¹ Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1974), p. 68-80. Horner was a white supporter of the Aboriginal activists and prominent member of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), the first national (mostly non-Indigenous) activist organisation established in 1958.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2, 35, 168.

themselves. It was not homogenous and politicisation did not always mean support for all Aboriginal protests and causes. It also supports my argument that a physical connection to Cummeragunja was key in actively aiding the former residents.

Another biographical work of significance in these years was from Clements' daughter, Margaret Tucker whose autobiography *If Everyone Cared* was published in 1977. This book described her life against the backdrop of government policies and treatment of Aboriginal people. Tucker was an activist born at Cummeragunja and later became the treasurer of the Australian Aborigines League (AAL), an organisation that played a large role in supporting the protesters.¹³ In terms of the walk-off, Tucker described how it affected members of her family who still lived at Cummeragunja and who took part in the protest, such as her sister Geraldine Briggs.¹⁴ Tucker also revealed interesting stories of support from Sydney and Melbourne such as food and money, supplies and transport.¹⁵ An important part of her book were the connections she made with the wider non-Aboriginal community, including some very close white supporters and friends of the walk-off. She was also a leading Aboriginal activist in Victoria over many years. Tucker's biography was a significant development in Aboriginal memory, not only because she was an important Aboriginal activist who provided aid to the protesters, but also her book represented a sort of hybrid of the short biographies written by her mother and Morgan from the 1940s and 1950s on the one hand, and the long white-authored biographies developing during the 1960s and 1970s.

Biographical works featuring Aboriginal lives continued into the 1980s. A notable one was Diane Barwick's "Aunty Ellen: The Pastor's Wife".¹⁶ Ellen Atkinson was another key Aboriginal activist from the time who was involved in

¹³ Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker M.B.E.* (Sydney: URE, 1977), p. 17, 165.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168-170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* & Morgan, *Reminiscences*, p. 16. Interestingly she states that Patten was responsible for the protest happening, while Morgan twenty-five years earlier stated that there was no leadership in the protest.

¹⁶ This was a chapter in *Fighters & Singers: The lives of some Aboriginal women*, an important book featuring several Aboriginal women and edited by Barwick and two other leading female anthropologists in 1985.

the walk-off.¹⁷ Barwick had got to know Atkinson and became close to her during the 1960s through her work on Victorian Aboriginal communities. Atkinson passed away in 1965 and Barwick's chapter is a tribute to her friend.¹⁸ On the walk-off, Barwick described Ellen and her husband Edwin's role in the protest, with Edwin being the protesters' pastor who provided spiritual aid and as a spokesman to the media.¹⁹

Biographies continued with collaboration pieces between white writers (historians and anthropologists) and Indigenous elders, particularly as the Aboriginal elders aged and it was felt that recording their life stories was important. This was the case with Hilton Hamilton Walsh working with Rosalie Simkin and Lyn Loger to write *Double ID* in 2001, and Camilla Chance with Banjo Clarke to write *Wisdom Man* from 2003. Both of these men were involved in the walk-off, but were not leaders or influential figures at the time.²⁰ Walsh was born at Cummeragunja and described the walk-off, identifying Jack Patten, former resident, as responsible for the protest, and how the protest led to the residents finding a new life for themselves in Victoria.²¹ Clarke, too, provided information from the walk-off stating how Patten had bravely started the protest, and described the threatening nature of the white station management to the protest.²² While descriptions of the walk-off are reasonably brief in these biographies, they are important because they uncover previously unknown voices who were involved in the walk-off.

¹⁷ Diane Barwick, "Aunt Ellen: The Pastor's Wife," in *Fighters & Singers: The lives of some Aboriginal women*, ed. Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 175-199.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Barwick described the written history of life at Cummeragunja focused on her family, the motivations behind the walk-off and life after the protest. In this chapter Barwick provided much information on Cummeragunja's history, including life at the station, before and after the walk-off. In 1911 Ellen married Edwin Atkinson (Doug Nicholls's uncle), who later became a pastor at Cummeragunja, which provided both with great responsibility.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190-191. Barwick also described the support that was given to protesters from Melbourne by the AAL in the form of food and money, the politics that was happening in NSW and Victoria to end the protest throughout 1939, and briefly the media's reaction. Although Barwick's biography is shorter than Clarke and Horner, it is more focused on the surrounding area of Cummeragunja because Ellen largely lived there.

²⁰ Banjo Clarke and Camilla Chance, *Wisdom Man, Banjo Clarke as told to Camilla Chance: The compassionate life and beliefs of a remarkable Aboriginal Elder* (Camberwell: Viking an imprint of Penguin Books, 2003), p. 99-100. & Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Rosalie Simkin and Lyn Loger, *Double ID: Life Story of Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Born 11th June, 1923 Died 5th December, 1997; Written, using his own words and diction, by Rosalie Simkin & Lyn Loger* (Shepparton: Prominent Press, 2001), p. 42-43.

²¹ Walsh, Simkin and Loger, *Double ID*, p. 42-43.

²² Clarke and Chance, *Wisdom Man*, p. 99. These two books are also similar autobiographies as they were written at the direction of Walsh and Clarke.

The history of Indigenous protest was becoming increasingly important, and another form of recording Indigenous memory was through the work of community historians who largely focused on Aboriginals who had not recorded their past. In the early 1990s collections by oral historians were published in book form. These included the work of community historians Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell's *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria* (1991), and journalist Stuart Rintoul's *The Wailing* (1993). While Jackomos and Fowell gathered the testimony of Indigenous Victorians alone, Rintoul captured Aboriginal voices from across Australia. In these two books a number of new unknown voices who were involved in the walk-off or were children of the protesters emerged.²³ These voices included those of Wayne Atkinson, Geraldine Briggs, Fay Carter, Merle Jackomos, Bevan Nicholls and Emmanuel Cooper.²⁴ This was a new method of expanding the field of oral history research as it allowed the information on the walk-off to be told by people who were largely unknown.

While all of this Indigenous memory was being recorded and collated, historians began to systemically challenge the 'great Australian silence' around Aboriginal history in the 1970s and Aboriginal history found its own place in academia.²⁵ This helped fuel research into the walk-off, which interestingly, showed the history of the Victorian Aboriginal community was an early focus of a number of

²³ Wayne Atkinson quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 182-184.; Geraldine Briggs quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 164.; Geraldine Briggs quoted in Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books Australia, 1993), p. 64-66.; Fay Carter quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 180.; Emmanuel Cooper quoted in Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books Australia, 1993), p. 266-268.; Merle Jackomos quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 166-172. & Bevan Nicholls quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ B. Attwood, "Aboriginal history, minority histories and historical wounds: the postcolonial condition, historical knowledge and the public life of history in Australia," *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (2011): p. 173. & Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Melbourne: Viking, 1999), p. 92. While all of this memory was being recorded and collated Aboriginal history came into its own within academia as historians began to systemically challenge what W.E.H. Stanner called the national 'cult of forgetting' in relation to Aboriginal people and Indigenous-settler relations. Work was begun in this space in the 1970s with C.D. Rowley's three-volume trilogy of Aboriginal history and then a range of historians began working on the nineteenth century frontier. Throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s and 1990s Aboriginal history came into its own, becoming a new vibrant genre of Australian history and challenging many, previously sacrosanct understandings of Australia's past. Included in this was the idea of a peaceful settlement and of the Aborigines as passive. Indeed, resistance became an important new focus of a number of historians. These historians included Manning Clark, Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan. As the field grew other themes emerged, one important one being Aboriginal people's struggles for land and civil rights. Interestingly, the history of the Victorian Aboriginal community was an early focus of a number of key historians and the walk-off featured in most.

key historians and the walk-off featured in most. One of the first of these was Richard Broome's 1982 book *Aboriginal Australians*. Broome focused on how Indigenous Australians responded to British settlement from 1788.²⁶ Although Broome was one of the first academic historians to publish a book on Aboriginal history and the walk-off to the wider public, his approach on both is consistently very general and not changed in the decades of his works being republished.²⁷ More recently he published a biography of Alick Jackomos with fellow historian, Corinne Manning. *A Man of All Tribes* (2006) is useful because it focuses on a man who, while not Aboriginal himself, was a strong supporter of Aboriginal rights throughout his life and worked closely with the Aboriginal community to recall their stories. It is a useful source because of Jackomos's proximity to the Cummeragunja community in particular and the event of the walk-off which included his collecting money for the protesters as a young teenager.²⁸

A very substantial contribution to both the history of the walk-off and Aboriginal history in particular was Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972*. Published in 1996 it was a detailed political history of Aboriginal people in NSW, with a particular focus on the centrality of land to their struggles.²⁹ She is one of the few historians to include discussion of the walk-off from a NSW perspective. Indeed, she devoted an entire chapter on the Cummeragunja walk-off from an Indigenous perspective in terms of land and political rights, as well as the protest's influence on future Aboriginal protests, such as the walk-off at the Brewarrina Station in 1940.³⁰ She covered not just the events leading up to the protest but also what the reactions were in NSW and Victoria in terms of politics, society and in the media.³¹ While my thesis uncovers new light and arguments around some of her sources,

²⁶ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-1980* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 78, 80-84, 156, 166, 168. The main themes of these books were to explain Australian history from the Indigenous perspective, rather than the tradition narrative.

²⁷ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: a history since 1788* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010), p. 206-207.; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 170-172. & Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 263-264.

²⁸ Richard Broome and Corinne Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), p. 22-24.

²⁹ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. xvii-xxiv.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247-258. & Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 – 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 400-409.

³¹ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 247-251.

particularly in relation to Nazi involvement in the walk-off, her book is very important for my study because of its regional focus and the fact that she is one of the few historians to situate the walk-off in its broader context.³²

Also emerging in the late 1980s and 1990s are Victorian based historians Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, both of whom have published a number of works as individuals and collaborators, related to Aboriginal history and the walk-off. Markus published a number of works on Aboriginal Australians and Australian society's support for indigenous protestors. One of these was the archival biography *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* in 1988.³³ The book included a brief introduction about the history of the organisation, but Markus relied on documented primary evidence throughout the rest of the book to provide Victorian Aboriginal voices and an understanding of civil rights in these previous unknown sources. Markus also wrote *Governing Savages* in 1990. This is a study of Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁴ He uncovered an interesting landscape where politicians, missionaries and bureaucrats in these years have to respond to a range of interlocutors, from women's groups to a range of humanitarian groups and individuals, who were critiquing government policy in these years.³⁵ While not mentioning the walk-off, Markus nonetheless provided interesting discussion around why certain aspects of late 1930s Australian society became interested in the 'Aboriginal question' in these years. This included Aboriginal groups in Victoria such as the Victorian Aboriginal Group, the Aboriginal Fellowship Group, and the Aborigines Uplift Society, and in NSW, the Sydney based Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship and the Association for

³² *Ibid.*, p. 252-253. & "Nazis Behind Panic: Why Aborigines Fled Camp: Colonies Aim," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1. The best example of undermining this Nazi narrative was the support for the protestors from the Sydney based newspaper *The Publicist*. *The Publicist's* support was significant because even though they were Nazi sympathisers, publishing sections of Hitler's January 30th speech, they defended Jack Patten in the face of his alleged Nazi connection, condemning the story by the *Daily News*. "Arrest of J.T. Patten," *The Publicist*, March 1, 1939, p. 16; "J.T. Patten Convicted," *The Publicist*, April 1, 1939, p. 7. & "Patten V. "The Daily News," *The Publicist*, May 1, 1939, p. 3.

³³ Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 1. & Andrew Markus, *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 19, 107-111. Biographies on Cooper were written in the early 1960s by his Indigenous kin and in the late 1970s by Diane Barwick as part of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

³⁴ While the focus is not relevant Markus's work in uncovering a range of interested parties in Aboriginal affairs is.

³⁵ Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages* (Sydney, Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1990), p. vii-ix, 158-172. Many of these groups were southern-based, coming mainly from Sydney and Melbourne.

the Protection of Native Races.³⁶ This also included the growing interest in Aboriginal welfare by the communist party and its programs to develop aid to the Indigenous Australians throughout the 1930s.³⁷

Markus and Attwood continued to be interested in, and write histories of, Aboriginal civil rights. They collaborated to write two edited books on this theme, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* in 1999, and the 2004 book *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League*.³⁸ Both books use Aboriginal based material from the period under review. They attempt to reconstruct the history of Indigenous activism in the demand for civil rights during the interwar years using documentary evidence from Aboriginal people, including those involved in the walk-off.³⁹ It is also important to note that *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights* followed the history of Aboriginal activism and interwar political activity, with the book using oral sources.⁴⁰ *Thinking Black* followed a trend of white writers exploring the life of William Cooper beginning in the early 1960s and in the late 1970s as part of *Australian Dictionary of Biography* by Barwick.⁴¹

Bain Attwood also published the book *Rights for Aborigines* (2003), which was a study of campaigns for rights, among both black and white activists, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.⁴² His focus was looking at the history through the themes of rights, race, history and Aboriginality in Australia.⁴³ However, his focus was firmly on Victoria and he hoped that this would bring the broader national study into review. Attwood's argument about the walk-off evolved by exploring how and why the residents left the land they had fought for since the 1880s.⁴⁴ He highlighted the importance of the AAL's change of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158-159.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159-160.

³⁸ *Thinking Black* could almost be called a new edition to Markus' previous work *Blood From a Stone*.

³⁹ Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 11-18, 155-161.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18. The book also provides information as to why organisations such the Communists supported Aboriginal rights.

⁴¹ Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 1, 113-123. *Thinking Black* also continued Markus's *Blood From a Stone* by publishing many Aboriginal primary sources relating to Cooper and the AAL, as well as continuing to develop historiographical debate on inter-war Aboriginal activism.

⁴² Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 31-53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. x-xiv.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

leadership during the protest. His argument that a younger generation of activists propelled and helped prolong the protesters cause is important to my sense of how the protest advanced.⁴⁵ Importantly, he acknowledged the blow which the strike effected on the bureaucracy and noted the power of it as a symbol of direct action.⁴⁶

The most recent and most detailed history to discuss the walk-off is that of cross-cultural historian Fiona Davis who has researched the Cummeragunja station in great depth from its establishment in the 1880s, to the residents regaining control in 1960s. Her 2014 book *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station* explores the theme of settler colonialism which saw white people set boundaries on Aboriginal behaviour and movements. However, she shows how Aboriginal people maintained agency and incorporated aspects of white culture to push beyond the limits forced upon them, with the walk-off as one of the main examples.⁴⁷ Davis's approach also involves the use of local history of the surrounding area in places like Shepparton, Barmah and Echuca, utilising local newspapers and Aboriginal memory.⁴⁸ Particularly important for the purposes of this thesis is Davis' use of Aboriginal memory, her micro historical approach and her effective use of local history from the areas around Cummeragunja and the walk-off.

As the foregoing overview suggests, the Cummeragunja walk-off has figured quite prominently in a number of histories and in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons. A number of approaches have emerged. Importantly, Aboriginal memory of the event has been told and retold to new generations, as it was at the time. These show us the importance of place, identity and resistance itself to ongoing forms of political empowerment and these early works have been important to my sense of the protest and to the significance of place to it. Other approaches have been around the recovery of the story of the strike in the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48-52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁷ Fiona Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station: Redrawing Boundaries* (Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 1-10, 117-133. & Fiona Davis, "Colouring within the lines: settler colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888-1960s" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 2-25, 184-214.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Davis argument also included the social interactions between the Cummeragunja people, and the various stakeholders of this station, white culture and the walk-off's enduring legacy in terms of collective memory.

context of Aboriginal political history across time, or, in the case of Attwood and Markus, in the context of a wider story of civil and land rights history in Australia. Davis's work extends this still by placing the Cummeragunja story in the context of local and regional history and the history of the station itself.

To date, there has been no single study of the event in the context of the broader social and political climate in Australian society, the changing nature of Aboriginal politics, the role of the media and the way these things meshed at that moment in time. While Aboriginal memory is important, I intend to explore the reactions to the event as much as the event itself. In this way the reactions and responses to the walk-off become a way of exploring the anxieties, tensions, concerns and fears of a society in which the Aboriginal question and the question of colour loomed large in the first decades of the twentieth century. Important too, is recovering the central significance of place to the event itself and its ongoing legacy in Aboriginal memory.

Structure

The thesis is divided into four chapters each exploring a different aspect of the walk-off. Chapter one focuses on the Aboriginal population who lived at Cummeragunja, their policisation at this time and their special connection to their traditional land before and after colonisation. Chapter two analyses the development of individuals, groups and organisations in Melbourne and Sydney who were becoming increasingly interested in Aboriginal welfare, and their reaction to the walk-off in terms of supporting the protesters, placing pressure on the State Governments or ignoring the protest altogether. Chapter three will cover the reaction and coverage of the walk-off in the newspapers across Australia, although I will largely explore NSW and Victoria, and also New Zealand. Chapter four is centered on the responses of the bureaucracy and the manager of Cummeragunja, McQuiggan, who attempted to resolve the walk-off quickly through propaganda and threats.

Terminology

Throughout most of this thesis I will use the word Aboriginal in reference to the First Australians, with the exception of chapter one. For chapter one the term 'Yorta Yorta' will be used to specifically refer to Aboriginal population who not only resided on the Cummeragunja Station, but who have a history that has existed around the area for thousands of years.

CHAPTER ONE

"THE BARMAH FOREST IS OUR ANCESTRAL HOME. CUMMERAGUNJA IS SPECIAL"¹: DHUNGULLA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE.



This picture shows traditional fishing in Bark Canoes on the Murray (Dhungulla) at the Old Maloga Mission, during the 1870s.²

An important way of interpreting the walk-off's singularity is to understand it in relation to place and, in particular, the Murray River. It is no accident that it occurred on the river which not only had an immediate importance to the residents who resided on it but a significance stretching back thousands of years. The walk-off was novel in itself but, in reality, it was a 'swim-off'. The protesters had to cross the river to camp on the other side. Non-Aboriginal people might have thought twice about making such a move. The river would have been a barrier. However for the Aboriginal community the river had always been a

¹ Aunty Beverley quoted in Lois Peeler, *RiverConnect: Aboriginal Oral History: The Cultural Landscape of the 'Flat' Shepparton Mooroopna* (Shepparton: Greater Shepparton City Council, 2008), p. 7.

² Image taken from "Barmah-Millewa National Park," OnCountry Learning Site: Yorta Yorta Forest-Wetlands, available from <https://waynera.wordpress.com/barmah-millewa-national-park/>

place of access, sustainability and cultural enrichment. It is notable that this has not been discussed further to date. The focus has been on the resistance itself, rather than the mode or method. Aboriginal historian, Wayne Atkinson, a child of the protest, has mentioned the significance of the Murray River to the people who lived along it, as has Lois Peeler in her Aboriginal oral history on the cultural landscape of 'the Flat,' the wetlands where the protesters settled after the walk-off had ended.³ Beyond this Heather Goodall has talked about the significance of country to Aboriginal society, culture and politics in southeastern Australia, which included a reference to the Murray River and how the Yorta Yorta lived off the land.⁴ Also in *Rivers and Resilience*, Goodall and Allison Cadzow argued how the Aboriginals on the George's River in NSW were connected to the river in terms of history, time, place and spirituality.⁵ In this chapter, we see the importance of the Murray River as both a means of sustenance and survival but also as a boundary and space used for escape and protest. While, for the states involved, the river represented an actual physical separation, this was not the case for the Aboriginal people themselves for whom this boundary did not exist.

The statement from Aunty Beverley heading this chapter emphasises the importance of two areas of land in Yorta Yorta history: Cummeragunja and the Barmah Forest. Cummeragunja was special for modern Aboriginal history, not only because the name 'Cummeragunja' meant 'my country'/'our home'⁶ but also many had lived there for decades importing some of their traditions with European methods of civilisation. However as the life worsened there in the inter-war years, the population returned to their ancestral home at the Barmah Forest in Victoria, but remained close to the Murray River.⁷ Not only was this walk-off an important demonstration in the history of Aboriginal political

³ Wayne Atkinson, "Ngariarty: Speaking Strong; 6 The Schools of Human Experience," in *First Australians: an illustrated history*, ed. Rachel Perkins, Marcia Langton, Wayne Atkinson, James Boyce, R.G. Kimber, Steve Kinnane, Noel Loos and Bruce Pascoe (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2010), p. 185-190. & Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. iv-v, 6-13, 24-33.

⁴ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 1, 12.

⁵ Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience: Aboriginal People on Sydney's Georges River* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), p. 5-9.

⁶ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 82. & Merle Jackomos quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 166-170.

⁷ Aunty Beverley quoted in Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 7. & Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 6.

protest, which by now was becoming increasingly more effective, but it appears to have a deep connection in Yorta Yorta history.

In this chapter the Aboriginal protesters' connection to Cummeragunja and Barmah will be explored, particularly the significance of the river. The place was not just a site of historical and cultural meaning but the protest was supported by strong Aboriginal and political leaders William Cooper, Margaret Tucker and Doug Nicholls all of whom were connected, in some way, to Cummeragunja. Although based in Melbourne and working for the AAL they 'came back' to lend support to the residents. Connection to country was important but so, too, was the new style of publicity they brought to bear on the struggle. For the protesters themselves it is important to understand the increasing politicisation they were influenced by and why they remained close to Cummeragunja instead of possibly heading further south towards Melbourne where there was a strong Aboriginal community. It is also important to understand this connection in terms of those who remained at Cummeragunja rather than leave with the protesters.

The Yorta Yorta people as a nation have traditionally been a river people with the Murray River (or 'Dhungulla' in the Yorta Yorta language) an important area of rich cultural and societal significance, as well as the home of the great spirit ancestor, Baiame.⁸ This way of life had existed for thousands of years, with the elders passing on the hunting and spiritual knowledge even after colonisation.⁹ During tribal times, the river had never been a boundary as it was in the middle of their traditional lands but, following British colonisation, it was regarded as a dividing line for these Aboriginal people.¹⁰ In 1851 the colony of Victoria was established and, by 1855, the Murray River was formally recognised as the

⁸ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 185-187.; Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 6, 8. & Jessica K. Weir, *Murray River Country: An ecological dialogue with traditional owners* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009), p. 55-57.

⁹ Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 12-13.

¹⁰ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 185-187. & Mavis Thorpe Clark, *The Boy From Cumeroogunga* (Sydney, Auckland, London, Toronto: Hodder and Soughton, 1979), p. 112.

boundary between the two colonies.¹¹ This spilt of the Yorta Yorta traditional lands was their first understanding of European border politics.

Following the creation of the colony of Victoria and the division of their traditional land many Aboriginals in the area were displaced and drifted around the towns along the Murray River. However, their plight was recognised by Daniel Matthews, a storekeeper who kept river steamers in provisions. Concerned about the plight of the Aboriginal tribes along the river he eventually established an Aboriginal village and school which the Aboriginal people called 'Maloga'. With his wife, Janet, he became a leading spokesperson and defender of Aboriginal people.¹² At Maloga the Matthews created the Scholars Hut where, together with an Indian teacher, Thomas Shadrach James, they provided a basic education including in matters such as human rights, democracy, and the privileges of British citizenship to the residents.¹³ This was the start of what Wayne Atkinson called the 'foundations of Yorta Yorta political consciousness'.¹⁴

By 1883 following a petition signed by the Aboriginal residents at Maloga, Daniel Matthews secured 1800 acres of river frontage near Barmah for a new Aboriginal station called Cummeragunja meaning 'my country' in Yorta Yorta after the Aboriginal people it was built for.¹⁵ Also in 1883 the NSW Government formed an Aborigines' Protection Board, a bureaucratic system to oversee the lives of Aboriginals in the state.¹⁶ However Maloga declined because of poor

¹¹ "Australian Constitutions Act 1850 (UK)," Documenting A Democracy, available from <http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-76.html> & "New South Wales Constitution Act 1855 (UK)," Documenting A Democracy, available from <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-78.html>

¹² Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 190-192. & Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black*, p. 80.

¹³ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 190-192. & Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 6.

¹⁴ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 190-192.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189-190.; Diane Barwick, "Aunty Ellen: The Pastor's Wife," in *Fighters & Singers: The lives of some Aboriginal women*, ed. Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 181.; Diane Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga: Pioneers and Policy," in *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development*, ed. T. Scarlett Epstein and D.H. Penny (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1972), p. 50.; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black*, p. 82.; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 262.; Nancy Cato, 'Matthews, Daniel (1837-1902)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 5, (MUP, 1974), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/matthews-daniel-4170>; Valerie Djenidi, "State and Church Involvement in Aboriginal Reserves, Missions and Stations in New South Wales, 1900-1975 and a translation into French of John Ramsland, Custodians of the Soil. A History of Aboriginal- European Relationships in the Manning Valley of New South Wales. Taree: Greater Taree City Council, 2001" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Newcastle, 2008), p. 50-51, 57-58.; E. G. Docker, *Simply Human Beings* (Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press, 1964), p. 157-161.; Len Fox, "New South Wales," in *The Struggle for Dignity*, ed. William M. Murray (Melbourne: Council of Aboriginal Rights (Vic.), 1962), p. 52.; George E. Nelson, 'James, Thomas Shadrach (1859-1946)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 14, (MUP, 1996), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/james-thomas-shadrach-10610>. & Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

funding, residents' dissatisfaction with Matthews and it was a thorn in the sides of NSW and Victorian Aboriginal Boards, which in 1888 led to many residents with the buildings to move to Cummeragunja.¹⁷ Even after Maloga closed, James continued providing education at Cummeragunja, and for many Yorta Yorta, this new Station was the place where they built a life that included Aboriginal traditions but incorporated many European ideals.

Despite these events and the political maneuvering they epitomised, the river continued to be important to the Cummeragunja residents. It was the one continuum in this changed landscape with which the societies had a very close connection. Because of the meat shortages on the station, many residents in fact lived off it, eating fish, oysters, mussels, crayfish (yabbies), turtles, ducks and swans (including the eggs of the ducks and swans).¹⁸ Traditional methods of clothing were used also and their food included a range of game meat from the vicinity of the river such as kangaroos (also skin), wallabies, wombats (also skin), emus (also eggs), rabbits, and possums.¹⁹ There were non-meat provisions too, such as honey from beehives (to sweeten their tea as sugar was scarce), fungus from gum trees, plants, mushrooms and roots.²⁰ Merle Morgan stated the food from the river provided a supplement to the basic rations of tea, milk, sugar, jam, salt, flour, baking soda and meat.²¹

Beyond this, there also remained a natural and human connection to the Murray River. Many residents had their own boat for river crossings and the children would swim and play in it in the summer months.²² At night, around the fire, elders would tell the story of their people and of their first interaction with white

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Barwick, "Aunt Ellen," p. 184-185.; Merle Robertha Jackomos Nee Morgan, *Life On An Aboriginal Reserve-Cummeragunja*, 1980, PMS 4638, AIATSIS, Canberra, p. 1-4.; Jackomos quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 166-170.; Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker M.B.E.* (Sydney: URE, 1977), p. 33-42.; Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Rosalie Simkin and Lyn Loger, *Double ID: Life Story of Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Born 11th June, 1923 Died 5th December, 1997; Written, using his own words and diction, by Rosalie Simkin & Lyn Loger* (Shepparton: Prominent Press, 2001), p. 21, 31-33. & Weir, *Murray River Country*, p. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 6. & Jackomos quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 166-170.

²² *Ibid.*

people along the river.²³ This connection to the Murray also involved incorporation of western European values, for example the celebrations at Christmas time were marked with sports days on a bend in the river.²⁴

In later years the Murray River was used not only for food, but also crossing it provided a means of escape and protection when the NSW APB became evermore controlling over their lives and the station. In this context some residents fled, or were forced to leave, starting an exile community.²⁵ For those still at Cummeragunja there were river crossings for church services at the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) Church in Victoria, and others traveled to the Victorian town of Barmah to collect mail and buy extra groceries.²⁶ The Murray River was also used as an escape route by Aboriginal children who swam to Victoria to avoid being taken by the NSW police under orders from the APB, to forcibly place them in training homes, such as the Cootamundra Training Home for girls on the south west slopes of New South Wales.²⁷

This continuing reliance on the Murray River after declining standards of living meant that when the decision was made to walk-off Cummeragunja it was clear they would remain close to the River. Although Cummeragunja was special to Aboriginal people for the happy memories during the early years, after thirty-years of continuous mistreatment by the NSW APB, and the exposure to the new manager, A.J. McQuiggan's brutal authoritarian rule, the station needed to be reformed for the residents to continue to live there. As life worsened at Cummeragunja Aboriginal political resistance was gathering apace in the outside world. There was much criticism of the operations of the APB across the state, particularly in the way they administered their stations and implemented the

²³ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 184-185.; Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 1-4.; Jackomos quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 166-170.; Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 33-42.; Walsh, Simkin and Loger, *Double ID*, p. 21, 31-33. & Weir, *Murray River Country*, p. 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "Clarke, Banjo (1923-2000)," Indigenous Australia, available from <http://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/clarke-banjo-17786>; Banjo Clarke and Camilla Chance, *Wisdom Man, Banjo Clarke as told to Camilla Chance: The compassionate life and beliefs of a remarkable Aboriginal Elder* (Camberwell: Viking an imprint of Penguin Books, 2003), p. 7, 99-100.; Theresa Clements, *From Old Maloga: The memoirs of an aboriginal woman* (Pahran: Fraser & Morphet, 1940s), p. 6-8.; Emmanuel Cooper quoted in Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books Australia, 1993), p. 266-268.; Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 4-6. & Walsh, Simkin and Loger, *Double ID*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* There was a threat that if anyone left without the permission of the manager their cottages would be pulled down. As Cummeragunja declined with the poor rations leading to large numbers of people dying and children being taken off the Station, the desire to escape from this life was growing ever more powerful.

law. Aboriginal dissatisfaction culminated in a very dramatic protest. In 1938, on the occasion of Australia Day, many of the former residents of Cummeragunja including William Cooper, Jack Patten, Doug Nicholls and Margaret Tucker had helped plan a successful public protest called the Day of Mourning. The purpose of this protest was to use the 150th anniversary of the First Fleet to bring to the Australian public's attention the mistreatment of Aboriginal people since the first settlement of Australia in 1788.²⁸ It was a demand for full citizenship and civil rights and freedom from the Board.

The Day of Mourning attracted widespread publicity from the press and the NSW Government. It revealed how effective public protest could be and how it might work in the case of Cummeragunja too.²⁹ Following years of failed correspondence and a recently unsuccessful petition in November 1938, between the Cummeragunja residents and the bureaucracy, requesting the removal of the manager McQuiggan and for an inquiry into the station, discussion now centered around some sort of public stance or protest to achieve the rights they had known for decades they were entitled to.³⁰ This protest would be started where the residents knew they could live off the land, as well as away from the control of the bureaucracy and where it would attract the most attention. It would be across Dhungulla into Victoria, but still in the Barmah Forest which they saw as their home and a place of freedom.

This was the case when the walk-off started in early February 1939 and it was decided that the protesters would make their stand for political rights from the camp at Barmah. As this was a new form of mass demonstration it was believed the act itself, of crossing from one state into another, would win them a hearing,

²⁸ "26th January 1938," Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, available from <http://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/collections-online/digitised-collections/day-mourning-and-protest-aborigines-conference-75th-anniversary/26th-january-1938>

²⁹ Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 30, 54.; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 12, 63.; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 19.; Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice: the Letters of Helen Baillie to Farnham Maynard 1933-36," in *Anglo-Catholicism in Melbourne: Papers to Mark the 150th Anniversary of St Peter's Eastern Hill 1846-1996*, ed. Colin Holden (Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1997), p. 93.; Andrew Markus, *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 17. & Paul W. Newbury, *Aboriginal Heroes of the Resistance: From Pemulwuy to Mabo* (Surry Hills: Action for World Development, 1999), p. 29.

³⁰ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 208.; Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 43.; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 21-22.; Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls Aboriginal Leader* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1972), p. 112.; Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 - 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 393, 402. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 248-249.

yet for many it was also a gamble, as they were unsure how long they could maintain the protest.³¹ Their demands for reforms were hardened after February 4th when the NSW APB issued a statement on radio blaming the walk-off solely on “an agitator”.³² This agitator was in reference to Jack Patten who had entered Cummeragunja with a pass from the NSW APB and had given a speech on February 3rd criticising the conditions there, resulting in the police seizing him.³³

Soon after, the majority of the residents at Cummeragunja, tired of the mistreatment, walked off. For the protest to continue on their traditional lands it was decided to construct a more permanent camp and a school for the children. This demonstrated the power of their own historical experience along the river. The school was headed by Hillus Briggs, one of those who walked-off. She continued the education system that she had been exposed to several years earlier at Maloga under Shadrach James.³⁴ The protesters also released their demands: for a Royal Commission into their treatment at Cummeragunja, the removal of the manager, Arthur McQuiggan, the return of the farm blocks to the Cummeragunja owners, support for agricultural development at the station, the removal of APB control and full citizens rights.³⁵

While many of the residents knew of the political and human rights they were entitled to, they also knew the risks of solely living off the land along the river. Former resident Ronald Morgan and visitor Banjo Clark described the walk-off as the climax to the many years of unrest when Aboriginal people wanted citizens rights promised to them, resistance against the manager and the

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 50. & Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities,” p. 402.

³³ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 63.; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 22.; Barwick, “Aunty Ellen,” p. 190.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 113-114. & Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1974), p. 76-79. Jack Patten told the residents that the reserve would soon be developed into a compound, their child endowment would cease and their children might once more be taken away.

³⁴ Barwick, “Aunty Ellen,” p. 184-185.; Clark, *The Boy*, p. 112-113.; Docker, *Simply Human Beings*, p. 161-162.; Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities,” p. 402. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 61, 95. Ellen Atkinson and Margaret Tucker praised James’s education and for bringing a strong sense of wellbeing to Cummeragunja. James had educated Tucker’s mother and aunt at Cummeragunja and Maloga. Soon there was great difficulty at the strikers’ camp after heavy rainfall on the largely flat surface made the camp very muddy. But the protesters were determined to continue the fight.

³⁵ Barwick, “Aunty Ellen,” p. 190-191. & Goodall, “A History of Aboriginal Communities,” p. 402-403. Just to put it in further detail the protesters wanted a public investigation of their serious grievances for example the leasing of their land and destruction of their homes; their inferior education and the lack of job training at Cummeragunja; and the inadequacy of the rations from the NSW APB.

regulations of the station.³⁶ Geraldine Briggs who lived on the station stated that the walk-off happened because of mistreatment and bullying by the APB, and the threatening and intrusive nature of the McQuiggans.³⁷ Resident Merle Morgan also wrote of McQuiggan's harsh punishment, and continuing discontent led to the residents leaving to form their own community.³⁸ Although only 10 years old and not understanding the politics, Merle documented the anger of residents when they had to leave and possibly face starvation.³⁹

This fear of possible starvation proved to be correct. As shown, in the past decades, the river had aided as a source of food for the residents at Cummeragunja. However, according to Merle Morgan, Geraldine Briggs and child resident, Bevan Nicholls, there was difficulty in finding food on the campsite by the late 1930s.⁴⁰ This lack of food may have been because of environmental decay due to the pressures and practices of British settlers. There were also a lot of mouths to feed in addition to a pre-existing exile community there. In the face of this, the protesters quickly organised meetings to determine what the camp needed most, and many were able to get some food support from other Aboriginal people working on Shepparton fruit plantations.⁴¹ Some had even travelled to Mooroopna and Shepparton in order to obtain food, working as pickers, canners and packers during the picking season.⁴²

³⁶ "Clarke," Indigenous Australia, available from <http://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/clarke-banjo-17786>; Clarke and Chance, *Wisdom Man*, p. 7, 99-100. & Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunja and its Aboriginal People* (Fitzroy: Fotoscreen Process Printers, 1952), p. 16.

³⁷ Geraldine Briggs quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 164.; Geraldine Briggs quoted in Rintoul, *The Wailing*, p. 64-66.; "Geraldine Briggs AO (1910 - 2005): A tireless campaigner for human rights," Victorian State Government: Department of Premier and Cabinet, available from <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/projects-and-programs/leadership/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll-2011-inductees/geraldine-briggs-ao-1910-2005> & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 169-170. She called McQuiggan a "pig" because of his authoritarian management, by carrying his revolver, threatening to shoot residents and how he would only take sick adults and children into town in the back of his truck. According to Briggs, McQuiggan's wife was no better, as she would always walk around everyone's house, judging how clean their houses were and invaded their privacy.

³⁸ Richard Broome and Corinne Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), p. 64-65.; Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 4. & Jackomos quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 170, 172. There was the difficulty of men who left Cummeragunja to find employment only to be told that there was no work for them. She also spoke about the NSW APB taking away girls from Cummeragunja to Cootamundra Girls Home to be trained as domestic servants. Most never returned. Interestingly Morgan revealed the community had its own Aborigines Inland Mission church, including three missionaries who lived in a small cottage next to the church.

³⁹ Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 6. & "Cummeragunja Walk On," *Koorier* 3, May, 1989, p. 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* & Bevan Nicholls quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 106. Bevan also remarked on the rationing and starvation at Cummeragunja. He recalled the population having to stand in line for rations such as flour and tea, if they ran out before you arrived you had to borrow.

⁴¹ Alec Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (Ronin Films, 1983), 45-46 minute mark. The foods included were fruits such as pears, peaches and many other things.

⁴² Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 169-170.

This connection to place and the significance of the river is also relevant for those who remained at Cummeragunja during the protest, as they felt a strong attachment to the station despite its issues. Even though the walk-off was a grand Aboriginal political protest, there were still residents who remained attached to Cummeragunja. What was the feeling towards those who remained? Theresa Clements, mother of Margaret Tucker, stated she had mixed feelings where, on the one hand the residents wanted to live like human beings and on the other, it would be psychologically difficult for many, especially the children to leave Cummeragunja.⁴³ Mavis Thorpe Clark in the 1960s argued that although the majority left, there were those who remained creating a bitter long-lasting hostility between these families as well as weakening their collective strength from this great political demonstration.⁴⁴ Merle Jackomos'⁴⁵ description was the opposite; she mentioned that her father and grandfather refused to leave along with others, and spoke about how houses were removed by McQuiggan.⁴⁶ She also stated in 1991 how quite a few people refused to leave as they felt their land was more important and believed if they remained it meant the land could not be sold or given away as punishment for being involved in the walk-off.⁴⁷

On the other hand, there were some who initially did not take part in the Murray River crossing, but did so a few days later. This was the case of the Station's Pastor Edwin Atkinson, and his wife, Ellen. The Atkinsons did not leave Cummeragunja until McQuiggan ordered Edwin to remain neutral and not to provide help to his people. This harsh ultimatum led them to join the protesters a fortnight after the walk-off started.⁴⁸ It appears that when it came to a choice between place and people, the strongest relationship was to the people and the Atkinsons developed as key allies to the protesters. Edwin and Ellen provided what they could for the hungry and to ease the discomfort after the camp had flooded after heavy rainfall. Importantly at a public meeting on February 26th Edwin criticised McQuiggan for his treatment of the residents and the failure of

⁴³ Clements, *From Old Maloga*, p. 7-8.

⁴⁴ Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 113.

⁴⁵ Formally known as Morgan, she married an activist of Greek heritage called Alick Jackomos.

⁴⁶ Jackomos, *Life on an Aboriginal Reserve*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Jackomos quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191. & Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 114.

the petition, which was subsequently reported in the press.⁴⁹ Pastor Edwin was also entrusted as the spiritual advisor who also provided money for their food.⁵⁰ The need for a spiritual advisor for the Cummeragunja residents was important. For many Yorta Yorta people Christianity was a significant influence since the days of the Maloga Mission where Daniel Mathews' missionary values held respect with the population. This meant Edwin's role in the walk-off was important in providing spiritual guidance and he was an influential figure in helping to establish their lives at Barmah.⁵¹

The Importance of Place in Relation to the Leadership

While the foregoing has established the significance of the river and place to the protesters themselves, it is also important to recognise its significance for the leaders of the action, those younger Aboriginal activists, who were all born, raised or had built a life at Cummeragunja and had relatives involved in the walk-off. This was the case for William Cooper, the Patten brothers (Jack and George), Doug Nicholls, and Margaret Tucker. Although they weren't physically living on the station at the time, they all came to the aid of the protestors by utilising the existing political, social and cultural options available to them. Jack Patten, who helped initiate the walk-off, was the first influential figure to bring the protest to the wider stage by sending a telegram from Barmah direct to NSW Premier Stevens informing him the population of Cummeragunja was leaving because of mistreatment, and demanding an immediate inquiry.⁵² For his actions, he and his brother George were arrested by Moama police for inciting

⁴⁹ "Why the Blacks Left: Meeting at Camp, Shepparton," *The Argus*, February 27, 1939, p. 2.; Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.; "Why Blacks Left Camp," *Daily Advertiser*, February 28, 1939, p. 7.; Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 78. & "Exodus From Cummeragunja: 'Persecuted By Manager,' Says Natives: 'Misled By Agitator,' Says Manager," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 7. At this meeting it was decided that the protesters would return only if assurances were given such as an inquiry would be held and that no children would be taken away. It was also at this time that Miss Hillus Briggs established a school for the children at Barmah to continue the long protest.

⁵⁰ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191. & Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 114.

⁵¹ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 50.; Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 184-185.; Fiona Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station: Redrawing Boundaries* (Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 119.; Fiona Davis, "Colouring within the lines: settler colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888-1960s" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 199.; Docker, *Simply Human Beings*, p. 161-162.; Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 25. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 61, 95. Edwin was greatly affected by the protest: it was difficult having to watch his people suffer from lack of food.

⁵² Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 117.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 197.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 251. & Jack Patten, to Bertram Stevens, 3 February 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 158. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 114.

the population to leave Cummeragunja. In March Jack was given a suspended sentence of three months while George was acquitted.⁵³ Although Jack Patten continued to work with the protesters, and formed a political alliance between the coastal Aborigines' Protection Association, an NSW-based Aboriginal organisation and, via William Cooper, the AAL, he only had a minor role during the rest of the strike.⁵⁴ His brother George became one of the protesters' chief spokespersons and helped to raise money to support them.⁵⁵

As for William Cooper, who had seen the rise and decline of Cummeragunja, the walk-off meant a loss of everything he had wanted Cummeragunja to be, which was a modern developed station for Aboriginals with proper government support.⁵⁶ Cooper supported the protesters but continued to hold onto a belief in a reformed Cummeragunja trusting the NSW Government to resolve the situation, which can be seen by his resumed correspondence to Premier Stevens justifying the walk-off. He wrote to Stevens on the 20th February expressing his frustration at the failure of the APB to address the McQuiggans and the problems with Cummeragunja, not because of outside "agitators" as reported by the press.⁵⁷ Cooper stated that the walk-off occurred as a way to bring attention to conditions at Cummeragunja to the Government and the public, in the hope for a new deal on Aboriginal affairs.⁵⁸ When the correspondence failed to drive any result, Cooper began the long campaign through the AAL in Melbourne to mobilise political, public and financial support.⁵⁹ When conditions became increasingly worse at the Barmah site, Cooper helped convince many to return, as he believed he managed to achieve a deal from the APB that would result in

⁵³ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 207.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 113-114.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 117.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 197.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 401-402.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 251.; Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 76. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 168-169.

⁵⁴ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 50.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 403.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 252. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ William Cooper, to Bertram Stevens, 20 February 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 159. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 114-116. & Markus, *Blood From a Stone*, p. 107-109. Cooper received no reply to the letter but the APB informed Mr. McQuiggan and the result was increasing fear and victimisation at Cummeragunja, which led to the walk-off and the new harsh conditions the protesters were living under.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Cooper concluded by requesting Stevens' involvement in helping to end the strike by establishing an inquiry into Cummeragunja enabling the protesters to return to their homes.

⁵⁹ Barwick, "Auntie Ellen," p. 191.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 115. & Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 402.

the inquiry the residents wanted.⁶⁰ But this trust of the APB was betrayed. Many returned at Cooper's request but conditions actually worsened as McQuiggan sought to punish them. A second walk-off resulted and Cooper remained bitterly disappointed and critical of the NSW Government. This was demonstrated when he wrote another letter on the 28th April highlighting the anger of Victorian citizens at the failure of the NSW Government to start an inquiry, and failure to address the intensifying persecution by McQuiggan.⁶¹

Two other Aboriginal supporters, Douglas Nicholls and Margaret Tucker also had a connection to Cummeragunja. Both had grown up at Cummeragunja, with memories of happy times there, and both suffered because of the NSW APB's policies.⁶² Nicholls was forced to find work off Cummeragunja and Tucker was forcibly taken to Cootamundra.⁶³ During this time both built a life away from Cummeragunja, Tucker as treasurer of the AAL and Nicholls playing for the Victorian Football League for Fitzroy in the 1930s.⁶⁴ At this time, he was becoming increasingly involved in Aboriginal rights and even attended the Day of Mourning in Sydney.⁶⁵ The two were greatly affected by the walk-off as both their families were involved in the protest. Nicholls and Tucker advised their families to remain in Victoria for three months to be eligible for the dole.⁶⁶ During the walk-off Tucker supported the protesters by getting as much help as

⁶⁰ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 118. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 198. This could not have been easy for Cooper and the protesters as many camped at Barmah were still terrified of him because of his rifle and vile language. But Cooper believed the Board would change things.

⁶¹ William Cooper, to Bertram Stevens, 25 April 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 118. & 28 April 1939 quoted in Markus, *Blood From a Stone*, p. 111. (This letter is the same in both books, however the date is different.); Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 117-118. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 197-198.

⁶² Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 198-199.; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black*, p. 82-83.; Richard Broome, 'Nicholls, Sir Douglas Ralph (Doug) (1906-1988)', *ADB*, 18, (MUP, 2012), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 12-13, 32, 36, 39-40.; Docker, *Simply Human Beings*, p. 161-162.; A. Jackomos, "Marge Tucker, M.B.E.," *Koorier* 3, December, 1989, p. 15.; Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 27-28. & "Tucker, Margaret Elizabeth (Auntie Marge) (1904-1996)," *Indigenous Australia*, available from <http://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/tucker-margaret-elizabeth-auntie-marge-1556>. Doug was the youngest of five children of Herbert and Florence Nicholls. Similar to his parents he was educated by Thomas Shadrach James and had a largely carefree childhood as he grew up during the golden years of Aboriginal autonomy at Cummeragunja.

⁶³ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 198-199.; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black*, p. 87-88.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 39-40.; Clements, *From Old Maloga*, p. 6-8.; Broome, 'Nicholls', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>; Jackomos, "Marge Tucker," *Koorier* 3, December, 1989, p. 15. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 61, 95.

⁶⁴ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 190-191.; Broome, 'Nicholls', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 41-43, 55, 58, 62, 105, 114.; Clark, *The Boy*, p. 112. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 165.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* The members of his family included his father, his brothers and sisters and their young families. According to Clark's biography, many of the shelters at Barmah were no worse than some of those at Cummeragunja, but Doug was aggrieved to have his family living as outcasts.

⁶⁶ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 190-191.; Broome, 'Nicholls', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 114.; Clark, *The Boy*, p. 112.; Clements, *From Old Maloga*, p. 7-8.; Jackomos, "Marge Tucker," *Koorier* 3, December, 1989, p. 15. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 168-169. The members of Doug's family included his father, his brothers and sisters and their young families.

she could from Sydney and Melbourne using all her left-wing connections to raise support.⁶⁷ She was especially active in Melbourne, through diverse activities such as attending music concerts, where she sang and played the ukulele, as well as collecting money in tins which she sent to the camp in cars.⁶⁸ During the walk-off the Cummeragunja people looked to Doug Nicholls for help because of his standing in the white community as a famous AFL player. He agreed and was disheartened by their suffering.⁶⁹ Nicholls also attended a meeting at Barmah on February 25th-26th alongside his uncle Edwin who provided Nicholls with information on the suffering at Cummeragunja, the issues with McQuiggan and the failed 1938 petition.⁷⁰ Nicholls and Tucker became regular speakers, alongside George Patten and Shadrach James, at the Yarra Bank and on Melbourne street corners supporting the protesters and providing much needed assistance from everyday white Australians.⁷¹

Not every Aboriginal leader was united in supporting the walk-off, as was the case with William Ferguson. Although Ferguson helped to start the Aborigines' Progressive Association (APA) which was, in many ways, the sister organisation of the AAL, and despite Ferguson's closeness to Cooper, he was angry with Jack Patten over his role in the walk-off, and distanced himself from him. Since 1938 there was a split in the APA between Ferguson and Jack Patten, as Ferguson believed in changing the system from within the Government bureaucracy. This split led to the creation of the Dubbo APA and made support for the protest difficult, which is seen by Ferguson being reported in the Dubbo press as levelling charges of negligence against the APB, but repudiating Patten's actions.⁷² Ferguson also refused to provide any public statement of support for the protesters during the entire nine months of the walk-off.⁷³

⁶⁷ Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 44-45 minute mark. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 169.

⁶⁸ Jackomos, "Marge Tucker," *Koorier* 3, December, 1989, p. 15. & Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 44-45 minute mark.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 114. & Clark, *The Boy*, p. 114-115. They gathered and gave their views on the walk-off, similar to Eddy Atkinson.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 114. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 77-78.

⁷¹ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 49-50.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 115.; Clark, *The Boy*, p. 115.; Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 44-45 minute mark. & Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 169.

⁷² Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 48-49.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 79-80. Goodall argued that Ferguson's decision to make a statement to the Dubbo press was either because of his continuing antipathy towards Patten or Ferguson's desired cultivation of ALP support.

⁷³ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 400.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253. & J. Maynard, "Vision, Voice and Influence: The Rise of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association," *Australian Historical Studies* 121 (2003): p. 93.

These political differences are important reasons as to why Ferguson did not provide aid to the protesters. However, there is another equally significant reason that has been explored in this chapter, which is that he was never connected to Cummeragunja. Ferguson was not born at Cummeragunja, had not lived there or had any family involved in the walk-off, unlike his colleague Jack Patten. Ferguson was also not a Yorta Yorta man and had no strong need to risk his political future on a protest at a place that he had never called home.

This is in stark contrast to the support the protesters received from Melbourne. In contrast to the division in the APA, the AAL campaign of support in Melbourne was large and organised, collecting food and blankets for the strikers, who were refused endowment and APB rations from Melbourne and Sydney.⁷⁴ During the second walk-off in July the AAL were still busy organising the public campaign to create a wider awareness of Aboriginal living conditions, and a petition for a Royal Commission.⁷⁵ Throughout the year, members of the AAL also constantly spoke to the press to raise attention to the protest and to counter the propaganda spread by McQuiggan and the NSW APB.⁷⁶ This included statements from George Patten, Cooper, and Tucker, who used the press as a means to help the protesters and to challenge McQuiggan and the NSW APB.⁷⁷ George Patten reported on the sufferings of the protesters and their demands for an inquiry

⁷⁴ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253.

⁷⁵ Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 125. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 205.

⁷⁶ "300 Aborigines Leave Mission," *Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 5.; "Blacks' Request," *The Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Blacks' Change of Citizenship: Mission Grievance Ignored," *The Courier-Mail*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Adamant in Ban on Camp," *The Herald*, February 16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *The Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives Left Mission," *The Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines At Barmah: Sustenance And School Sought," *The Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Desert Station: Alleged 'Tyrannical Administration': 'Trouble Fomented by Agitator,' Says Manager," *The Horsham Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Mainland Notes: Plight of Aborigines," *The Mercury*, July 25, 1939, p. 6.; "'Return - or No Rations': League Will Help Natives," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Inquiry Awaited: Aborigines Who Left State," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 14, 1939, p. 8.; "Still On Other Side of Murray: Cummeragunja Aborigines," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray: Fear Loss of Their Children," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Natives Again Cross River: Victimised, They Say," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Leave Compound: Crossed Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, February 7, 1939, p. 9.; "Aborigines' Flight," *Northern Star*, February 14, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Run Short of Food," *Northern Star*, February 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Personal: Cummeragunja Natives Returning," *Riverine Herald*, March 14, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Rumors Denied," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Complain: Victimisation Alleged," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Help For Blacks: Inquiry On Cummeragunja Camp," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Natives Firm, Food Short," *The Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Leave Station: Families Cross Border to Victoria," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17.; "Natives Will Return to Aboriginal Station if Conditions," *The Telegraph*, February 14, 1939, p. 9. & "Aborigines Leave Mission Station As Protest," *Weekly Times*, February 11, 1939, p. 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

into Cummeragunja.⁷⁸ Tucker wrote an article for the Communist newspaper the *Workers' Voice*, where she described the poor standards of living at Cummeragunja and asked the readership to aid in their fight for liberty and freedom from the APB.⁷⁹ Cooper defended the protesters at the start of the first walk-off commenting on their lack of food and the fact that conditions at Cummeragunja were the worst they had been in the station's history.⁸⁰ Cooper also wrote a letter to Sydney's left-wing newspaper *The Australian Worker* produced by the Australian Worker's Union where he explained the demands of the protesters as being an impartial enquiry/Royal Commission into the treatment of Aboriginal people in NSW or a totally reconstituted Board with Aboriginal representation.⁸¹

Despite Cooper's ongoing support, there was a really important development during the protest which signalled the importance of a younger generation with new ideas and, more importantly, new alliances. Following Cooper's illness his more conservative approach was relinquished in favour of the more direct approach of Tucker and George Pattern who had developed connections to more radical left-wing organisations and groups in Melbourne.⁸² This was demonstrated with the formation of the Aborigines' Assistance Committee, with support from left-wing groups in Melbourne, with George Patten as organiser, and Tucker representing the AAL.⁸³ The Committee published a leaflet describing the reasons for the walk-off, the conditions the residents were living under during the strike and calling for financial help from the public.⁸⁴ By

⁷⁸ "Investigation Promised: Sustenance for Aborigines," *The Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Blacks Refuse to Go Back: Plight In Camp," *Herald*, July 24, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines Protest: Better Treatment Demanded," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, October 3, 1939, p. 6. & "Protest By Aborigines: Better Treatment Demanded," *Singleton Argus*, October 4, 1939, p. 1. George also stated that most of the stations land was leased to a white landowner.

⁷⁹ M. Tucker, "Half Caste Aborigine" [Margaret Tucker], 'Conditions at Cummeragunja,' *Workers' Voice*, March 1, 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 160-161. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 116-117.

⁸⁰ "Stir Among Blacks: 70 Leave Station," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Why Blacks Left," *Argus*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Natives Leave Station: Fear of Compound," *Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Conditions at Station Criticised," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10. & "Aborigines Uneasy. Flight from Native Station," *The West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19.

⁸¹ W. Cooper, "Aborigines Want A Royal Commission," *The Australian Worker*, May 10, 1939, p. 15. In *The Australian Worker*, Cooper had also spoken of the mistreatment and indifference of the Manager and the APB to the situation of the Aboriginal people.

⁸² Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 50-51.

⁸³ *Ibid.* & Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 22. These left wing groups included trade-unionists and Communist Party members. The reason why Onus and Tucker were representing the AAL over its leader Cooper was because he was ill most of the time.

⁸⁴ State Records NSW: Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Reel 1862, Premiers Letters Received. The Fight at Cummeragunja (leaflet) by Aborigines Assistance Committee, Document number 1247. It was largely through this pressure that the AAL extracted some concessions.

October 1939 the second strike ended when demands for sustenance, entitlements for Aboriginal workers and entry to school for the twenty-eight children at the camp were met.⁸⁵

This meant that the life built at Barmah had finally ended. However, interestingly, instead of returning to Cummeragunja, the protesters who had left during the second walk-off decided to settle close to Dhungulla across NSW and Victoria and, especially in the Victorian town of Mooroopna and at a newly established community called 'the Flat' along the Goulburn River.⁸⁶ As they were a river people, this suited them.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The quote from Aunty Beverly, at the beginning of this chapter, highlights the importance of place to the Yorta Yorta people. This includes the Barmah Forest and Dhungulla, the Murray River, which had historical and cultural significance before and after European colonisation. The Matthews understood this connection and it was during their time under Daniel's tutelage that many of the Cummeragunja residents received education and came to understand the significance of rights and citizenship. This period not only built a political consciousness, it no doubt helped sow the seeds of later political discontent.

During the rapid decline of Cummeragunja in the 1930s, the Murray River was increasingly useful, not only for food and ongoing survival but as a means of escape. With the development of more public Aboriginal protests during late 1930s Australia, and with life at Cummeragunja worse than ever, it was likely the Murray River would be used as a conduit for protest by the station's residents. Even though not all residents agreed with the protest and some residents stayed, it is clear that the place commanded an enormous amount of respect and connection to the people. This connection was clear for the main Aboriginal

⁸⁵ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 53.; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 22.; Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 79.

⁸⁶ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254-255. & Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 7, 9-11.

⁸⁷ Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 10-11.

supporters of the protesters Cooper, Jack and George Patten, Nicholls and Tucker, who were born there, were raised there, established a life there or had family involved in the protest. Whether their approaches were similar or different socially, politically or culturally, all had a common focus on working to help the protesters. This connection to Cummeragunja, or lack thereof, was also important in the case of Ferguson, who provided next to no support for the walk-off, not only for political reasons, but as he had no bond to the station. Even once the walk-off had ended and many decided to never return, they ultimately stayed close by and Cummeragunja retained a strong hold on their identities and memories.

CHAPTER TWO

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: THE RESPONSE TO THE WALK-OFF IN MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY.



Pictured above are a group of AAL members and their supporters, who are believed to be traveling from Melbourne to the strike camp, near Barmah to deliver food and clothing to the protesters. George Patten is the second figure on the left and the woman is Helen Baillie.¹

When the Cummeragunja residents crossed the Murray River from NSW into Victoria they strategically brought their plight to the attention of both Melbourne and Sydney. The walk-off was a catalyst not just for the Aboriginal residents themselves but for the wider non-Aboriginal community. Responses to the walk-off revealed how the social and political landscape had significantly shifted in late 1930s Australia, not least because of the amount of publicity the event generated. In this way, the protest captured the public imagination and attracted disparate organisations that had an existing and common belief in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. Many of the groups that supported the protesters had been developing throughout the inter-war years to the point where, in the late 1930s,

¹ Image taken from Alick Jackomos Collection, AIATSIS, (A4. BW. N3772.06)

they were becoming increasingly influential and difficult for State Governments to ignore.

This chapter charts this changed landscape by exploring the white responses to the walk-off in Melbourne and Sydney, the two cities most strongly impacted by the protest. What we see is how the two cities responded quite differently and how the significant, co-ordinated and long-standing protests of the Victorian Aboriginal community helped to advance their cause in a way not possible across the border in NSW, despite the pressure brought to bear on the NSW APB. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the success of the Victorian campaign was because of the strong connection between the key activists and Cummeragunja itself. Indeed, so strong was the Victorian protest, by both black and white, a reluctant NSW government was eventually forced to react. While not prepared for this campaign from its southern neighbour, it was nonetheless forced into a response, without apparently conceding defeat. While it eventually sacked McQuiggan, this was done in a quiet manner and the APB was itself modernised to accommodate the changed political landscape. In this way, the protest of black and white ultimately succeeded.

The rise of interwar humanitarianism in Melbourne and Sydney

During the interwar years a number of organisations and groups with an interest in the welfare of Aboriginals were emerging in Melbourne and Sydney, as well as the other southern cities across Australia. Although Aboriginal support organisations existed in the nineteenth and the early twentieth-century, it was during the interwar years that these voices were increasingly more prominent.² Many of these were motivated by Christian humanitarianism promoting human dignity, individual freedom and happiness through the teachings of Jesus; the ideals of British liberal democracy of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties and

² Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 15. & Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 – 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 288.

political freedoms; and/or socialist ideals of community ownership of wealth, land and welfare.³

Among the humanitarian supporters were the leaders of the Protestant churches, as well as women's organisations and the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) who were increasingly interested in promoting Aboriginal rights and welfare.⁴ Many Aboriginals from Cummeragunja were close to local Christian allies such as the Churches of Christ in Echuca and Melbourne. White middle-class women's organisations had been interested in Aboriginal well-being since the early 1900s.⁵ Since the creation of the USSR and the formation of CPA in 1920, Communist ideology was focused on combating racism against Aboriginals and had even developed programs around racial equality in the 1930s.⁶ One of the most prominent Communists was Tom Wright, Vice President of the Labor Council and a trade union official who adopted plans for reforming Aboriginals in the late 1930s in direct response to the government agenda.⁷

The support was reasonably widespread across the southeast. Sydney had a number of groups such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR). The APNR was the oldest, nation-wide, humanitarian lobby group, formed as early as 1911. By the 1930s its focus was mostly on conditions in the

³ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.; Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages* (Sydney, Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1990), p. 159-160. & Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection?: Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-1939* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2000), p. 22-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 40.; Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 17.; Communist Party of Australia. Central Committee. *Communist policy on the Aborigines of Australia* (Sydney: Central Committee, Communist Party of Australia 1963), p. 6.; "Communist Party of Australia," Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, available from http://indigenoustrights.net.au/organisations/pagination/communist_party_of_australia; Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 159-160.; "V. I. Lenin, Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions: For The Second Congress Of The Communist International," www.marx.org, available from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>; Workers News Editorial Board, *Betrayal: a history of the Communist Party of Australia* (Marrickville: Allen Books, 1981), p. 12. & Tom Wright, *New deal for aborigines* (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1944), (no page number) <https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/comintern/sections/australia/1944/19440531.htm>. Marx himself stated how the native races knew of crimes of the white race and at the Second Congress Of The Communist International Lenin addressed how the imperial powers had treated members of the colonies and 'weak nationalities'.

⁷ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 40.; Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 17.; Communist Party of Australia. *Communist policy*, p. 4-5.; Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 159-160.; John Shields, 'Wright, Thomas (Tom) (1902-1981)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 18, (MUP, 2012), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wright-thomas-tom-15654>. & Wright, *New deal for aborigines*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/australia/comintern/sections/australia/1944/19440531.htm>. The CPA described that the State and Federal laws of "protection" only meant exploitation and persecution. The CPA was also critical of the Australian's foundation as a country being based on the cultural and social loss of Aboriginal people. In 1939 Wright wrote *New Deal for Aborigines*, which again covered ten reform policies for the Australian Government to use to help Aboriginal people. The ten reforms included land rights, empowerment on reserves, equal opportunity for women, improvements in medical services etc.

Northern Territory. During the 1930s there were also individuals, for example the socialist Michael Sawtell, and the nationalists, Percy Reginald Stephensen (Jack Patten was introduced to him by Sawtell) and William Miles, who were focused on improving the lives of Aboriginal people in NSW. However, on the whole, white support was not as well developed and far-reaching for the Aboriginals in Sydney as in its southern counterpart in Melbourne.⁸

It was in Melbourne, where the number of groups and individuals interested in Aboriginal affairs became increasingly organised and vocal. There was already development of Aboriginal organisations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Group (1929), the Aboriginal Fellowship Group (1932) and the Aborigines' Uplift Society (1937), which Christian and prominent trade unionist, Arthur Burdeu, had helped to establish.⁹ Although they differed in terms of objectives and methods, each one had a similar belief in the need to reform the system of Aboriginal protection and the need to 'uplift' Aboriginal people into Australian society.¹⁰ An important reason for this wide support of Aboriginals was the number of Aboriginal Australians who had built a life in Melbourne after leaving Cummeragunja. They had become increasingly active, demanding equal rights utilising a number of political methods, including involving the press and spruiking in popular places like the banks of the Yarra. Through these activities, they found white allies in Melbourne, for example, soon after leaving Cummeragunja, William Cooper found an ally in Arthur Burdeu, who became the

⁸ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 15-17.; David S. Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime: Australian Enthusiasts For Hitler's Germany* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2012), p. 66, 70-71.; Chris Cunneen, 'Miles, William John (1871-1942)', *ADB*, 10, (MUP, 1986), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/miles-william-john-7576>; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 288.; Craig Munro, 'Stephensen, Percy Reginald (1901-1965)', *ADB*, 12, (MUP, 1990), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stephensen-percy-reginald-8645>. & Jill Roe, 'Sawtell, Olaf (Michael) (1883-1971)', *ADB*, Supplementary Volume, (MUP, 2005), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sawtell-olaf-michael-13186>. Sawtell had formed an organisation called the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship Rights, which was formed in 1938 to mobilise support for reform Aboriginal lives, was critical of the NSW APB, advocated for full citizenship rights for Aborigines, and provided support for Ferguson's APA.

⁹ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 15.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 288.; Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1974), p. 47.; A. Jackomos, "The Aboriginal Community of Melbourne," *Koorier* 3, September, 1989, p. 19. & Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 158.

¹⁰ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 15. & Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 158-159. The significant differences in the objectives and methods of the groups are as follows: The Victorian Aboriginal Group's primary objective was to recruit several University of Melbourne academics to gather information and spread it to members. The Group also wanted to play a minor role in helping to create a climate of opinion more favourable for Aboriginal welfare. The Aboriginal Fellowship Group brought together Christians who were interested in the welfare of Aborigines by the use of co-operation through Fellowship and Prayer as well as to promote 'a just and constructive national policy'. The Uplift Society wanted to achieve its goal by obtaining donations to help Aboriginal communities in Victoria. Many were also in poor financial status and memberships were comprised of less than a dozen active members.

only white male in the AAL.¹¹ Another prominent figure from Melbourne was Helen Baillie, a white, Christian socialist, nurse, who had grown up in a privileged family but expressed guilt at her family's history of success which involved the displacement of Aboriginal people.¹² Baillie had already helped to form the 'Aboriginal Fellowship Group' with like-minded Christians in 1932, becoming its Honorary Secretary, but Baillie did not work alone as she was affiliated with the Victorian Aboriginal Group.¹³ Her activism was enhanced after meeting with William Cooper and later other Cummeragunja figures like Margaret Tucker, Doug Nicholls, as well as Burdeu.¹⁴ Baillie had even driven Cooper, Tucker and Nicholls to Sydney for the Day of Mourning in 1938.¹⁵

Concern and assistance also came from a new generation such as Alick Jackomos, a Melbourne teenager of Greek heritage. Jackomos developed an understanding of Aboriginal discrimination from attending meetings on the Yarra Bank at Batman Avenue where many former Cummeragunja residents spoke, and at AAL members' houses with people such as Cooper, Nicholls, Tucker, and Eric and Bill Onus.¹⁶ He had also experienced contemporary racism. Because of his olive complexion he was often mistaken for an Aboriginal.¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 288.; Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 47. & Jackomos, "The Aboriginal Community," *Koorier* 3, September, 1989, p. 19. He was also in close contact with the Sydney-based Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR).

¹² Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 295-296. & Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice: the Letters of Helen Baillie to Farnham Maynard 1933-36," in *Anglo-Catholicism in Melbourne: Papers to Mark the 150th Anniversary of St Peter's Eastern Hill 1846-1996*, ed. Colin Holden (Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1997), p. 85-86, 92, 94-95, 295-296. Through reflecting on the Gospel's meaning, Baillie came to appreciate the social application of it and was converted to Christian socialism. During the 1930s she worked for a number of causes on the political left. Baillie also traveled to Russia in 1935, and protested the treatment of Jews by Hitler and the Nazis in 1933, and in 1936 she joined the Ethiopian Relief Committee to aid the International Red Cross in Abyssinia. Also in 1936 she became the Secretary of the Melbourne committee raising funds to send nurses during to the Spanish Civil War against Franco's forces.

¹³ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 295-296.; Grimshaw and Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice," p. 88. & Paisley, *Loving Protection*, p. 22-23. Baillie lived in England during the 1920s and became interested in the issue of slum clearance. In 1931 Baillie returned to Australia and embraced the Aboriginal cause.

¹⁴ Grimshaw and Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice," p. 93. & Paisley, *Loving Protection*, p. 22-23.

¹⁵ Grimshaw and Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice," p. 93.

¹⁶ Richard Broome and Corinne Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), p. 1, 4, 13, 14, 22-23. & "Alick Jackomos Retires," *Koorier* 3, May, 1989, p. 16. On March 24th 1924 Alick Jackomos was born at North Carlton, Melbourne. During the Yarra speeches there were lots of jeers and taunts by onlookers as the leaders spoke of the injustices faced by Aboriginal Australians, and described the steps to redress inequality throughout Australia. This early involvement in Aboriginal politics would define his later activism for the next few decades to come.

¹⁷ Broome and Manning, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 1, 4, 13, 14. During the 1920s and 1930s and he was often abused by being called a "Dago" and physically attacked. At a line for a football match someone called him "a little Dago" and pushed a hot meal into his face, he was taken to a hospital with burns to his face. But he viewed himself as an Australian first of Greek heritage and put aside the occasional racist remark.

Furthermore, many influential members of the AAL and the APA actively approached non-Aboriginal people and organisations to appeal for help in their struggles.¹⁸ The CPA, for example, was close to influential Aboriginal leader Margaret Tucker who saw similarities between the Communist ideology with regards to helping the underprivileged working-classes and witnessing Aboriginal mistreatment at party meetings during the Great Depression.¹⁹ On the other hand, Jack Patten was close to the Sydney-based nationalists, Stephensen and Miles, who through their monthly fascist paper the *Publicist*, provided money for the APA. Stephensen also helped organise the Day of Mourning.²⁰

It is important to note that this climate of organisation and affiliation was not without its tensions. There had been distrust between many of the individuals and groups for years before the walk-off. For example Amy Brown of the Victorian Aboriginal Group and Tom Wright were critical of the AAL, while the AAL, especially Cooper, were equally distrustful of the Communists and some of their white allies.²¹ Despite these veins of mistrust between individuals and groups, what was seen at this time, particularly in Melbourne was that a collection of individuals and organisations interested in Aboriginal matters had developed years before the walk-off.

Melbourne during the walk-off

¹⁸ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 14.

¹⁹ J. Jones, "The Black Communist: The Contested Memory of Margaret Tucker," *Hecate* 26.2 (2000): p. 135-143. & Alec Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (Ronin Films, 1983), 27 minute mark.

²⁰ Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime*, p. 66, 70-71.; Cunneen, 'Miles', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/miles-william-john-7576>. & Munro, 'Stephensen', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stephensen-percy-reginald-8645>. In *The Publicist* Stephensen had constantly denounced Australian treatment of Aboriginals, was a driving force behind the APA and issued a pamphlet written by himself about the 'Day of Mourning' protest to help William Ferguson and Jack Patten. He was also a former secretary of the Aborigines' Citizenship Committee and formed a friendship with Jack Patten. Stephensen had been an early campaigner for Aboriginal rights and helped to organise the 'Day of Mourning and Protest' to mark the sesquicentenary on 26th January 1938. Stephensen had also been influenced to help the Day of Morning as a protest against British imperialism. However Stephensen's role in the Day of Mourning is largely forgotten or overlooked. Miles in 1937-38 financed the APA as well as endorsing German Nazism in Australia and the return of German colonies like New Guinea from Australia in September 1937.

²¹ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 63.; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 17-18. & Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 288-289. Wright even referred to the group as the 'so-called "Australian Aborigines League"' as he believed Indigenous Australians of mixed blood should be absorbed into white society. The AAL were equally suspicious of the CPA and Margaret Tucker's close relations with its party members. In fact closeness between members of the AAL and CPA caused friction with white and even some black Christian supporters, including Burdeu who opposed the involvement of the Communists. Cooper in 1936 commented on the nature of white support in general where he stated how their friends were growing, however some regard Aboriginals as "inferior clay".

When the walk-off occurred the reaction from Melbourne was to form a large and organised campaign undertaken by the AAL, and their white allies. There were collections of food and blankets for protesters, especially from white organisations and the wider public. The major sympathetic coverage by the Melbourne press that featured quotes from the AAL aided in placing pressure on the Victorian Government to provide Unemployment Food Relief for the strikers through the harsh winter months.²² During the walk-off the AAL became increasingly close to the militant trade unionists and Communist Party members, to prolong the strike by creating a support network.²³ Before the walk-off under Cooper's conservative leadership, the AAL had some links with the Australian Labor Party and Christian groups, maintained a limited relationship with the trade union movement, and was a distrustful of the CPA.²⁴

This change came about for two important reasons. The first was many of the older allies such as the Christian groups were not willing to support a prolonged public protest. Although Christian groups were clearly concerned with the Aboriginals doing the protest, their approach was deeply paternalistic. In early March Cooper, Edwin Atkinson and the protesters had managed to find support

²² "The Natives of Cummeragunja," *Advocate*, May 25, 1939, p. 8.; "Sanctuary in Victoria: Rumors Stampede Aborigines," *The Age*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Cumeragunga Blacks," *The Age*, February 10, 1939, p. 15.; "No title," *The Age*, March 2, 1939, p. 11.; "Mission Natives Frightened: Man Convicted and Discharged," *The Age*, March 11, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines' Case: Students Urge Inquiry," *The Age*, April 18, 1939, p. 6.; "News Of The Day: Aboriginal Wit," *The Age*, April 20, 1939, p. 10.; "News from the Country: Echuca," *The Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; "Training, Not Old Clothes: Plea for Aborigines," *The Age*, June 1, 1939, p. 17.; "Border Aborigines," *The Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 10.; "Investigation Promised: Sustenance for Aborigines," *The Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "News in Brief," *The Age*, August 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Sustenance To Cease: Aborigines Plight," *The Age*, October 12, 1939, p. 12.; "Stir Among Blacks: 70 Leave Station," *The Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks Likely to Return: Left N.S.W.," *The Argus*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Welfare of Blacks: Blacks' Grievances," *The Argus*, February 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Welfare of Blacks: Why Blacks Left," *The Argus*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Restless Aborigines," *The Argus*, February 11, 1939, p. 33.; "Aborigines' Grievances," *The Argus*, February 21, 1939, p. 3.; "Why the Blacks Left: Meeting at Camp, Shepparton," *The Argus*, February 27, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks' Request," *The Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Aboriginal Unrest: Natives Leave Station," *The Argus*, March 4, 1939, p. 3.; "N.S.W. Mission Station: Man Convicted," *The Argus*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks' Grievances," *The Argus*, April 19, 1939, p. 11.; "Crossing the Board: N.S.W. Aborigines," *The Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines' Complaint," *The Argus*, May 19, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines' Conditions," *The Argus*, June 24, 1939, p. 3.; "Privations Suffered: Blacks Defiant," *The Argus*, July 25, 1939, p. 15.; "Black Create Problem: Relief Claims," *The Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23.; "Blacks Want School," *The Argus*, October 12, 1939, p. 8.; Wayne Atkinson, "Ngariarty: Speaking Strong; 6 The Schools of Human Experience," in *First Australians: an illustrated history*, ed. Rachel Perkins, Marcia Langton, Wayne Atkinson, James Boyce, R.G. Kimber, Steve Kinnane, Noel Loos and Bruce Pascoe (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2010), p. 209.; Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls Aboriginal Leader* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1972), p. 115.; "Aborigine Talks to Labour Club," *Farrago*, April 26, 1939, p. 4.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 404.; Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 253.; "Aborigines Adamant in Ban on Camp," *The Herald*, February 16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *The Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives Left Mission," *The Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Blacks Refuse to Go Back: Plight In Camp," *The Herald*, July 24, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines At Barmah: Sustenance And School Sought," *The Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Leave Mission Station As Protest," *Weekly Times*, February 11, 1939, p. 5.; "Enticed Aborigines From Mission," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5.; "Just a few lines to let you know.- A Glance Around The News," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6. & M. Tucker, "Half Caste Aborigine" [Margaret Tucker], 'Conditions at Cummeragunja,' *Workers' Voice*, March 1, 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 160-161. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 116-117.

²³ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50-51.

from members of the Churches of Christ, W.C. Hall, William Gale, the Churches' Secretary in Victoria and H. Hargreaves, the minister of Echuca, with Gale and Hargreaves urging an inquiry.²⁵ However, despite having knowledge of their mistreatment, Gale and Hargreaves requested the residents to return, rather than continue.²⁶ At the same time, the Aborigines Inland Mission of Australia, who had provided past service to the Cummeragunja community, now urged them to return, as they did not agree with the protest.²⁷

The second reason was the change in leadership. As Cooper's health worsened during the second walk-off, more left leaning leaders, such as George Patten, Margaret Tucker and Eric Onus, began to take more control.²⁸ This was clearly shown with the formation of the Aborigines' Assistance Committee with Patten, Tucker and Onus alongside Victorian Labor politician Dr. William Maloney M.H.R. as president, and J.F. Chapple, the General Secretary of the Australian Railway Union, as vice-president.²⁹ The Committee was devoted to raising public awareness of Aboriginal mistreatment and providing aid to the protesters through the distribution of leaflets, as well as placing pressure on the NSW Government for an inquiry. Despite these generational differences and the change in leadership, the former residents were able to maintain a coalition to support the protesters and place pressure on the State Governments.

²⁵ Fiona Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station: Redrawing Boundaries* (Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 118.; Fiona Davis, "Colouring within the lines: settler colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888-1960s" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 198.; Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 47.; Merle Robertha Jackomos Nee Morgan, *Life On An Aboriginal Reserve- Cummeragunja*, 1980, PMS 4638, AIATSIS, Canberra, p. 4.; State Records NSW: Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Reel 1862, Premiers Letters Received. H. Hargreaves, to W. Gale, 5 March 1939, Document number 1380-1381, 1384-1386. & State Records NSW: Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Reel 1862, Premiers Letters Received. W. C. Hall, letter, to NSW Premier Bertram Stevens, 6 March 1939, Document number 1382. In the letter Gale also described his official association where he was paid a small amount for monthly patrol allowance and visiting school on Sundays, while another Pastor William B. Payne of Echuca had honorary visits. Payne had formed a friendship with William Cooper and with the Cummeragunja people in the 1930s, after Cooper had left the Station. Payne would visit Cummeragunja numerous times as a pastor.

²⁶ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Gale, to Stevens, 7 March 1939, Document Number 1379, 1383. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Hargreaves, to Gale, 5 March 1939, Document Number 1380-1381, 1384-1386.

²⁷ C. Presnell and A. Peterson, "CUMMERAGUNJA-BARMAH," *Our AIM: A Monthly Record of the Aborigines' Inland Mission of Australia*, March 16, 1939, p. 9.

²⁸ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 22.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: The Aborigines' Assistance Committee (Information), Document Number 1243-1244.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: The Fight at Cummeragunja (leaflet) by Aborigines Assistance Committee, Document Number 1247.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Bernice McAuliffe, to NSW Premier Alexander Mair, 19 August 1939, Document Number 1394. & "We Have Our Own National Minority," *Tribune*, October 31, 1939, p. 3.

It is often argued that these white alliances influenced and shaped Aboriginal political protest. However, it was the methods employed by the Aboriginal activists themselves which helped to drum up this white support and they co-opted some of their tactics. One of the most active was Tucker, who employed a number of different methods to solicit support from people. She held musical concerts where she played the ukulele and sang to raise money.³⁰ At these events she, along with other Aboriginals and white supporters, would collect money in tins from generous trade union members, especially the waterside workers.³¹



Margaret Tucker playing the ukulele.³²

She also organised a car, loaded with milk, to be sent to the camp to feed the babies.³³ She later talked about ordinary Melbourne folk who helped the protesters, for example a butcher called Angliss who provided meat along with canned food, medicine and sugar from other residents.³⁴ In order to send this, Tucker flirted with a taxi driver to convince him to deliver the food and materials for free to the strikers.³⁵ When he reached Mooroopna, the driver wanted to help

³⁰ Jones, "The Black Communist," p. 136. & Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 44-45 minute mark.

³¹ Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 44-45 minute mark.

³² Image taken from *Ibid.*, 45 minute mark. This is an excerpt from a short 1935 newsreel film *A Princess of an Ancient Tribe*, but shown in the documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence*.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44-45 minute mark.

³⁴ Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker M.B.E.* (Sydney: URE, 1977), p. 169.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

more and brought two big bags of flour, more sugar and plenty of fruit for the grateful strikers.³⁶ Along with Helen Baillie, Tucker also provided Alick Jackomos with a tin to collect money for food and blankets to be delivered to the camps.³⁷ Jackomos and other fundraisers collected money along the Yarra Bank at Sunday meetings, similar to those only a few years before to support the protesters who were located at Barmah, Shepparton and Mooroopna.³⁸ As for Baillie, she formed a support group, which ferried carloads of supplies, and even journeyed to Cummeragunja to meet McQuiggan.³⁹

Many of the groups and organisations from Melbourne wrote to the NSW Government to express their support. In March, both the Young Communist League of Australia and the Australasian Council of Trade Unions wrote to Premier Stevens. Referencing a recent meeting, the latter were critical of the treatment of Aboriginal Australians generally, and demanded an inquiry.⁴⁰ In April George Patten managed to further push demands for an inquiry in the NSW APB and support for Aboriginals when he visited and spoke to Melbourne University's Labour Club, and to Australian Railway Union workers at Spotswood Workshop about the conditions of Aboriginals in NSW.⁴¹ In May, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria informed Stevens that a resolution was carried for Mark Davidson M.L.A. of the Industrial Labor Party for Cobar, NSW to

³⁶ *Ibid.* Although on the return journey he had a tyre blowout and the car was damaged requiring expensive repairs, but the driver was sincere, and a good friend, according to Tucker.

³⁷ Broome and Manning, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 23-24.; "Alick Jackomos Retires", *Koorier* 3, May, 1989, p. 16. & "People: Collaborating for Indigenous Rights: Alick Jackomos (1924 to 1999)," National Museum Australia, available from http://indigenoustrights.net.au/people/pagination/alick_jackomos. Alick's politicisation was a by-product of the relationships and socialising with people his own age based on common interests that he had previously forged with Aboriginal people.

³⁸ Broome and Manning, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 22-23.

³⁹ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: a history since 1788* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010), p. 206-207.; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 264. & "Exodus From Cummeragunja: "Persecuted By Manager," Says Natives: "Misled By Agitator," Says Manager," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 7. It is not known was exactly what she and McQuiggan discussed or why he spoke to Baillie only.

⁴⁰ Peter J. Morrison, "The Communist Party of Australia and the Australian Radical-Socialist Tradition, 1920-1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Adelaide, 1975), p. 381-382.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: C. Crofts, Australasian Council of Trade Unions, to Stevens, 22 March 1939, Document Number 1365. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Young Communist League of Australia, to Stevens, 7 March 1939, Document Number 1362. The Young Communist League was part of a hierarchical structure of the CPA. The last stages in the hierarchy were the Central Executive Committee, which was elected from the Central Committee. Division within the Central Committee were the various 'departments', which included the Women's Department, the Young Communist League, and the Agitprop (agitation and propaganda) Department.

⁴¹ "Aborigines' Case," *Age*, April 18, 1939, p. 6.; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 264.; "Aborigine Talks," *Farrago*, April 26, 1939, p. 4. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: J. F. Chapple, Australian Railway Union, to Stevens, 18 April 1939, Document Number 1359-1360. Chapple stated how there was a growing feeling in regard to the unfair treatment of Aboriginal people in Stations and Reserves controlled by the APB. There were also complaints with the policy failing to help Aboriginal people with insufficient education, rations and living arrangements.

hold an impartial inquiry into the Cummeragunja Station.⁴² In June, Amy Brown of the Victorian Aboriginal League wrote to Stevens stating how the Group was inquiring as to the treatment of Cummeragunja children, in terms of education, and employment outside the station.⁴³ The Australian League for Peace and Democracy wrote to Stevens tabling their petition for a Royal Commission into the APB and conditions at Cummeragunja, signed by everyday Victorians, Melbournites and influential people, for example, Baillie, Chapple and Victorian M.L.A. William McKenzie.⁴⁴ By mid-June there were already 800 signatures gathered with more signatures being sent to NSW as late as September.⁴⁵ The Women's Committee and Brighton Branch of the League also pressed for the Royal Commission.⁴⁶ In July, the Aborigines' Assistance Committee began a public awareness campaign for supporting the protesters and Aboriginals in NSW, and put pressure on the NSW Government.⁴⁷

When Stevens resigned the premiership on 3rd August 1939, for events unrelated to the walk-off, and was replaced by Alexander Mair on August 5th, many in Melbourne used it as an opportunity to start anew with the demands relating to the walk-off, the NSW APB and the living conditions of Aboriginal people.⁴⁸ Amy Brown, of the Victorian Aboriginal Group wrote to Mair requesting information regarding the walk-off, asking whether Mair received and acknowledged the signed petition, and whether a copy was sent to McQuiggan.⁴⁹ Chapple wrote to Premier Mair to update him that the resolution was passed at the meeting in April in favour of the Cummeragunja protesters and how £55 was gathered in

⁴² SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: M. L. Chesterfield, Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria, to Stevens, 18 May 1939, Document Number 1349.

⁴³ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Amy Brown, Victorian Aboriginal Group, to Stevens, 13 June 1939, Document Number 1336-1337.

⁴⁴ "Aborigines'," *Argus*, June 24, 1939, p. 3.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: L.P. Fox, Victorian Council of the Australian League for Peace and Democracy, to Stevens, 17 May 1939, Document Number Reel 1348. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: L.P. Fox, Victorian Council of the Australian League for Peace and Democracy, to Stevens, 9 June 1939, Document Number 1338. Others included Rev. Dr. Charles Strong, Miss A. Lambrick (the Past President of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom), Dr. S.J. Cantor, M.B., Mrs. I. Coe (Hon. Sec. Miners' Auxiliary, Wonthaggi) and Rev. Hugh Andrews (The Vicarage, Wonthaggi).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, Acting Under Secretary, Minute Premier's Department, 23 June 1939, Document Number 1327. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Fox, to Mair, 9 September 1939, Document Number 1288.

⁴⁶ "Aborigines'," *Argus*, June 24, 1939, p. 3.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Muriel Mayall, Women's Committee of the Australian League for Peace and Democracy, to Stevens, 3 July 1939, Document Number 1327. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: H.L. Whitney, Brighton Branch of Australian League for Peace and Democracy, to Stevens, 10 June 1939, Document Number 1339.

⁴⁷ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 52.

⁴⁸ Peter Ewer and Peter Spearritt, 'Mair, Alexander (1889-1969)', *ADB*, 10, (MUP, 1986), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mair-alexander-7466>. & John M. Ward, 'Stevens, Sir Bertram Sydney (1889-1973)', *ADB*, 12, (MUP, 1990), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stevens-sir-bertram-sydney-8650>.

⁴⁹ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Brown, to Mair, 7 August 1939, Document Number 1403.

August at Hawthorn to aid them.⁵⁰ Chapple pressed for a Royal Commission and revealed how deep seated the feeling of frustration was that the Aboriginals were not treated fairly.⁵¹

Despite being ill throughout the walk-off, Arthur Burdeu worked hard to rally public support, especially in Melbourne.⁵² He wrote to Mair to explain the issues regarding the walk-off, and to request Mair not to ignore the issue, expressing hope that the change of leadership would result in a more considerate approach. Burdeu also informed Mair of Melbourne becoming the natural headquarters for the protest, and that the public opinion in Victoria was currently more inflamed about the protest compared to Sydney and NSW, but he warned Mair that this could change with time.⁵³ Burdeu hoped the government would provide goodwill for the Aboriginals, and that a possible collaboration could happen.⁵⁴ Throughout both walk-offs Burdeu constantly spoke to the press in an effort to not only raise awareness of the protest but to also provide the truth in the face McQuiggan, and the NSW APB's cover-ups, as well as leveling criticism of the Victorian Government for not aiding the protesters.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Chapple, to Mair, 21 August 1939, Document Number 1241-1242. Although the letter had been replied to on May 29th there was no further information included. In the letter Chapple was critical of NSW authorities isolating what Victorian citizens, particularly organisations and groups including the Australian Railway Union, by ignoring what was asked of in the earlier letter on the subject of the treatment of Aboriginals.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 22.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Aborigines' Assistance Committee, Document Number 1243.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Aborigines' Assistance Committee (Information), Document Number 1244.; SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: The Fight at Cummeragunja (leaflet) by Aborigines' Assistance Committee, Document Number 1247. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: McAuliffe, Aborigines' Assistance Committee, to Mair, 19 August 1939, Document Number 1394. Chapple included in the letter leaflets detailing much information on the subject. One of which described the case for the Aboriginals and for a policy on securing Indigenous Australians equal rights to other citizens. Another leaflet about the walk-off in relation to the appeal for funds. A copy of a resolution from the public meeting at Hornthorn was included. Lastly there was a leaflet that was issued by the Left Book Club on the distribution at public meetings in support of Aboriginal people.

⁵² SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Arthur Burdeu, Australian Aborigines' League and Aborigines Uplift Society, to Mair, 7 August 1939, Document Number 1401-1402. In the letter Burdeu described his role as President of the AAL as providing leadership and that he was elected every year because of Aboriginal confidence in that role. Burdeu attempted to reassure the NSW Government that he was trying to be factual and would only provide an honest statement about the walk-off compared to the inaccurate press reports.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Burdeu stated that there are three requests for Mair to consider for resolving the walk-off: that an independent inquiry be established into the protest, the Aboriginal people will give evidence, and the AAL represent the Aboriginal people by assisting in putting their case forward.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Burdeu had heard kind expressions of Gollan.

⁵⁵ "News from the Country," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; "Blacks'," *Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Crossing the Board," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines'," *Argus*, May 19, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Adamant," *Herald*, February 16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave," *Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines At Barmah," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.; "Return - or No Rations': League Will Help Natives," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Inquiry Awaited: Aborigines Who Left State," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 14, 1939, p. 8.; "Still On Other Side of Murray: Cummeragunja Aborigines," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Natives Again Cross River: Victimised, They Say," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines' Flight," *Northern Star*, February 14, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Run Short of Food," *Northern Star*, February 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Personal: Cummeragunja Natives Returning," *Riverine Herald*, March 14, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Rumors Denied," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Complain: Victimisation Alleged," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Help For Blacks: Inquiry On Cummeragunja Camp," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja*

As for the Victorian Government, it had followed the suggestions of the Victorian Protection Board and remained neutral during the walk-off, but after a long campaign of public pressure from the media, Aboriginal protesters and white allies the Government was forced to reconsider its previous stance. During the first walk-off they believed McQuiggan's reports about the Aborigines having enough food, over Burdeu, members of the AAL and the Australasian Council of Trade Unions.⁵⁶ The Victorian Government also believed that because there was food at Cummeragunja there was no reason to help. There was no proof of the former residents' grievances, they did not have authority to inquire into administration in NSW or to issue rations, and the protesters would most likely return without causing trouble.⁵⁷

However, during the second walk-off they did provide aid following increased pressure in the form of the Victorian Minister for Labour and Sustenance, Mr Edwin Mackrell approving sustenance relief, pending an inquiry, which went against the demands of the Victorian Protection Board.⁵⁸ At the start of the first walk-off the Chairman of the Board, H.S. Bailey, stated that it was a NSW problem and that the protesters were not entitled to Victorian rations, but they would not be forcibly removed by the Victorian Government.⁵⁹ This attitude was accepted at the beginning of the second walk-off in late April, but the Board was unhappy with the sustenance provided by Mackrell, even believing the decision could

1938 to 1961, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Natives Firm, Food Short," *The Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Leave Station.: Families Cross Border to Victoria," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17. & "Natives Will Return to Aboriginal Station if Conditions," *The Telegraph*, February 14, 1939, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 77. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Crofts, to Stevens, 22 March 1939, Document Number 1365.

⁵⁷ "Blacks Likely," *Argus*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Blacks Likely To Return Own Camp," *The Barrier Miner*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.; Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 77.; "Absconding Aborigines," *The Northern Miner*, February 9, 1939, p. 4. & "Help For Blacks: Inquiry On Cummeragunja Camp," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8. The Victorian government ignored their case, which made it difficult to get the dole on the Barmah bank.

⁵⁸ "Border," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 10.; "Investigation Promised," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Black Create Problem," *Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23.; Diane Barwick, "Aunty Ellen: The Pastor's Wife," in *Fighters & Singers: The lives of some Aboriginal women*, ed. Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 191.; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 264.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 124-125.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 204-205. & "Help For Aborigines," *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, July 27, 1939, p. 13. Before Mackrell provided support for the protesters involved in the second walk-off the representatives of the Aborigines Uplift Committee, the Australian Aborigines League and the Central Unemployment Council had urged Mackrell. The secretary of the Central Unemployment Council, Mr. H. H. Lees stated the reason they were refused sustenance in the beginning was because Cummeragunja was open for them to return. Baillie, informed Mackrell, of the need for an education for Aboriginal Australians.

⁵⁹ "Cumeragunga," *Age*, February 10, 1939, p. 15.; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 264.; "Aborigines Flee: Inquiry Demanded: Into Treatment at Station," *Daily Advertiser*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Aborigines' Flight to Victoria: No Victorian Jurisdiction," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 7. & "Aborigines Leave Compound: Crossed Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, February 7, 1939, p. 9.

result in more Aboriginals coming to Victoria.⁶⁰ There was also the fear that Aboriginals might desert Lake Tyers Aboriginal reserve, the key concentration of Aboriginals in that state, to obtain the dole.⁶¹

However, what little support Mackrell offered ended after negotiations between the NSW APB and the Victorian Government in October, resulted in his sustenance provision concluding in November.⁶² This dropping of support continued when Sir John Harris, the Minister for Education, stated that there would be no admission for the protesters' children at the Barmah School, as it was full and education was offered at Cummeragunja.⁶³ An Aboriginal deputation of George Patten, Nicholls and other members of the AAL advocated for more help from Victorian Ministers, but the deputation were told of the NSW APB's assurances that they would be better at Cummeragunja.⁶⁴ Despite this failure of continued support, it was still an important step forward for political and public pressure to have Victorian Government ministers change their minds against the wishes of the NSW Government, the NSW APB and even their own APB.

It is important to note every group and organisation had the common goal of aiding the strikers and managed to achieve wide support in Melbourne. However there were many different demands and methods. While each organisation wrote and petitioned for an inquiry there were differences in terms of their goals.⁶⁵ In terms of methods used, all wrote to the NSW Government on behalf of the protesters, but largely as individuals rather than as a united effort.⁶⁶ There

⁶⁰ "Crossing the Board," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Black Create Problem," *Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23. & Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² "Sustenance To Cease," *Age*, October 12, 1939, p. 12.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 407. & "Aborigines At Barmah," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.

⁶³ "Sustenance To Cease," *Age*, October 12, 1939, p. 12.; "Blacks," *Argus*, October 12, 1939, p. 8. & "Aborigines At Barmah," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 52.; Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 79.

⁶⁵ William Cooper, to Bertram Stevens, 25 April 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 118. & 28 April 1939 quoted in Andrew Markus, *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 111. (This letter is the same in both books, however the date is different.); SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: William Cooper, Australian Aborigines' League, to Stevens, 20 February 1939, Document Number 1441. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, Minute, NSW Premier's Department Sydney, 12 October 1939, Document Number 1478-1480. For example the AAL, Cooper and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union only nominate their ally Mark Davidson M.L.A. of the Industrial Labor Party for Cobar to conduct the inquiry. Other organisations such as the Australian Railway Union requested an independent inquiry but provided no nominated figure to head it.

⁶⁶ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Crofts, to Stevens, 22 March 1939, Document Number 1365. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, Minute, NSW Premier's Department Sydney, 12 October 1939, Document Number 1478-1480. Some of these organisations did not only write letters. Many held meetings, while the Australian League for Peace and Democracy sent its petition.

were cases during the walk-off, where there were signs of successful co-operation, especially in the case of Baillie and Burdeu who worked with the different Aboriginal, left-wing, humanitarian and women's groups, before and during the protest.⁶⁷ Although there were differences, this loose coalition driven by the influential Aboriginal leaders, helped to pressure two major Australian cities.

Sydney

When the walk-off occurred the NSW Government was in the midst of its own bureaucratic crisis in relation to their administration of Aboriginal affairs. In reaction to the protest it appears that the NSW Government organised a plan, which kept the significance of the protest contained within the Government and the NSW APB, with the issues regarding Cummeragunja being reformed through legislation. The NSW Government had for years been aware of the awful treatment at Cummeragunja from its 1937-1938 NSW Select Committee Inquiry into the administration of the APB, where no action was taken because of the members' disinterest, and results of the 1938 Public Service Board's report were hidden by the Government.⁶⁸ This meant that when the walk-off started, the NSW Government had little interest in Aboriginal welfare or criticism of the NSW APB. Nowhere was this expressed more clearly than in the April reply to the Churches of Christ in Victoria letters, where the Acting Under Secretary of the Premier's Department referred to the letters received from Victoria as being based on inaccurate information, that protesters were misled by an agitator's lies and that only a firm and conciliatory attitude would resolve the situation.⁶⁹ Also in April an Acting Under Secretary of the NSW Premier's Department wrote a report about food and clothing distribution to Aboriginal people at

⁶⁷ Grimshaw and Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice," p. 90-91. In 1933 the Victorian Aboriginal Group coordinated a meeting with Helen Baillie as a speaker at the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy to aid Aboriginals, which did not just include Aboriginal support groups such as the Aboriginal Fellowship Group, but also the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

⁶⁸ Diane Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga: Pioneers and Policy," in *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development*, ed. T. Scarlett Epstein and D.H. Penny (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1972), p. 62-63.; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: a history*, p. 206-207.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 108-111, 115. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 187-191, 195.

⁶⁹ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Acting Under Secretary, NSW Premier Department, to Churches of Christ in Victoria, 6 April 1939, Document Number 1361.

Cummeragunja from Melbourne charitable organisations.⁷⁰ Importantly it stressed the Government's belief in containing the publicity of the protest by stating there was no need for public appeals for assistance on behalf of the protesters from Melbourne, and it would be appreciated if the Victorian Government and press could be advised on how to deal with the situation.⁷¹

The NSW Government also responded to organisations from Victoria, but largely in a bureaucratic, stonewalling manner. For example, the Acting Under Secretary, J.W. Ferguson wrote to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in May just to inform them their letter had been received and that the Premier was informed of it.⁷² In August, Ferguson replied to Burdeu and Brown's criticisms by using almost the same template response he provided months earlier⁷³ acknowledging the receipt of their letter and stating that it would be given 'careful consideration'.⁷⁴

Containment of the walk-off was made easier following only a limited amount of support from the humanitarian organisations. In Sydney, without the participation of any influential Aboriginals, including Ferguson, the campaign was smaller and not as effective, although Tucker stated that those in Sydney did all they could to help.⁷⁵ An example Tucker provided was of a publisher and bookshop in Sydney providing Jack Patten with his bail money.⁷⁶ Bevan Nicholls at the Barmah camp described support from Sydney in the form of food, including tins of dried oysters that were largely used in soup.⁷⁷ But the existing organisations and political groups at Sydney were largely silent on the walk-off, even though many had aided Aboriginals in the past. Accounts differ as to whether or not Sawtell cited the walk-off as an example of the NSW APB's bad

⁷⁰ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: The Acting Under Secretary, Chief Secretary Department, NSW Premier's Department, 26 April 1939, Document Number 1357. The Secretary indicated that the NSW Government had taken the same position as the APB, by stating how the State Government provided for the Cummeragunja population.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: J.W. Ferguson Acting Under Secretary, to J.H. Chesterfield, Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria, Melbourne, 24 May 1939, Document Number 1350.

⁷³ Apart from the use of 'sir' and 'madam'.

⁷⁴ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, to Brown, Victorian Aboriginal Group, 21 August 1939, Document Number 1400. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, to Burdeu, Aborigines Uplift Society, 21 August 1939, Document Number 1399.

⁷⁵ Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 169.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Bevan Nicholls quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 106.

administration policies, but what is known is his name did not appear anywhere else in relation to the protest.⁷⁸ This lack of help was extended to organisations. For example, the Aborigines' Assistance Committee proposal to help all Aboriginal Australians, received backing in Melbourne by some trade unions, however the NSW labour movements refused to support it.⁷⁹ The right-wing was only a little better. Despite the past support of the *Publicist* nationalists for the Day of Mourning, when the walk-off was occurring they praised it as a great gesture to bring public attention to the mistreatment by Government segregation. However, all three *Publicist* news stories largely centered on defending Jack Patten, rather than the protest itself.⁸⁰

Sydney organisations focused on Aboriginals appeared to be no better in supporting the walk-off, for example the APNR was more interested in reorganising the APB, than helping the protesters.⁸¹ Another, the Australian Natives' Association (ANA), who had a past history of helping and promoting the welfare of Aboriginals, were influenced by the NSW APB's propaganda about the walk-off being caused by outside agitators, that the matter would be resolved by the Board, and the protesters would be provided with everything they needed when they returned.⁸² Significantly the ANA agreed with the NSW APB's demand

⁷⁸ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 17.; "The A.W.U. Annual Convention: Afternoon Session. Thursday, 9th February, 1939," *The Australian Worker*, March 8, 1939, p. 17.; "Native Affairs: Protection Board Attacked: Incompetence Alleged," *The Canberra Times*, February 10, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines Board Criticised," *Daily Examiner*, February 10, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines' Board: Allegations of incompetence," *National Advocate*, February 10, 1939, p. 5.; "Citizen Rights: A.W.U. Told of Natives' Aim: 'Acute Racial Complex'," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 10, 1939, p. 14.; "Latest Telegraphic And Cable News: Aborigines Defiant: A.P. Board Management Criticised," *North West Champion*, February 9, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Board Criticised," *Northern Star*, February 10, 1939, p. 8.; "Latest Telegrams," *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, February 10, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines' Own Teachers: Appointment Suggested. Appeal For 'Better Deal'," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 27, 1939, p. 12.; "'Sad Plight Of Aborigines': Appeal to Members of State Parliament," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 13, 1939, p. 10. & "Aborigines Disturbances: Result of Bad Administration," *Wellington Times*, February 9, 1939, p. 1. Sawtell in Sydney, had an organisation, the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, which was a critic of the NSW APB, advocated for full citizenship rights for Aborigines, and provided support for Ferguson's APA. *The Australian Worker*, the *Canberra Times*, the *Daily Examiner* in Grafton, the *National Advocate* in Bathurst, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, *Northern Star* in Lismore and *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that Sawtell had criticised the NSW APB's management of Aboriginal people, but made no reference to the walk-off. While in the *North West Champion* at Moree, *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* and the *Wellington Times* stated Sawtell did mention the walk-off as part of the issues of NSW APB's bad administration.

⁷⁹ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 52.

⁸⁰ "Arrest of J.T. Patten," *The Publicist*, March 1, 1939, p. 16.; "J.T. Patten Convicted," *The Publicist*, April 1, 1939, p. 7. & "Patten V. 'The Daily News'," *The Publicist*, May 1, 1939, p. 3.

⁸¹ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Ferguson, Minute, NSW Premier's Department Sydney, 12 October 1939, Document Number 1478-1480.

⁸² John E. Menadue, *A Centenary History of the Australian Natives' Association* (Melbourne: Horticultural Press Pty. Ltd., 1971), p. 311. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: A.C. Pettit, Secretary of Aborigines' Protection Board, to Australian Natives Association in Sydney, 4 July 1939, Document Number 1323.

to inform their Victorian Branches that everything was good and even thanked the APB for their letter.⁸³

Despite the lack of aid from Sydney organisations, there were voices of discontent about the protest inside the NSW Government. Two allies who emerged at this time, as the walk-off was referenced in the NSW Legislative Assembly on March 4th, were members Mark Davidson and Joe Lawson the United Country Party for Murray.⁸⁴ Jack Patten had wired the two members as well as Premier Stevens about the treatment of residents and starvation of Cummeragunja.⁸⁵ Both asked George Gollan, the Colonial and Chief Secretary, as to whether he would take any future action in this protest.⁸⁶ Gollan followed the narrative of McQuiggan and the NSW APB when he replied there had been 'a little' unrest at the station, but it is not due to unkind treatment, it was Patten's fault.⁸⁷ Gollan even stated that Aborigines received every consideration and if they returned they would be treated the same as the Aborigines on other stations.⁸⁸

When the second walk-off occurred the AAL had telegraphed Michael Bruxner, the NSW Deputy Premier and Minister for Transport, and Mark Davidson, encouraging them to address the walk-off.⁸⁹ A few days later at a government meeting Davidson inquired again to Gollan about the treatment of Aboriginal people at Cummeragunja citing the insufficient rations, victimisation and poor health.⁹⁰ He asked if an independent tribunal would take place to better the conditions there, to which Gollan unsurprisingly replied that he had contacted McQuiggan who reassured him only thirty-one former residents were in Victoria

⁸³ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Pettit, Secretary of APB, to ANA in Sydney, 4 July 1939, Document Number 1323. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: H.R. Redding, ANA, Sydney, to Pettit, Secretary of the APB, 5 July 1939, Document Number 1410.

⁸⁴ "Aboriginal Unrest," *Argus*, March 4, 1939, p. 3. & "Aboriginal Station Trouble. "Largely Due to One Man," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4, 1939, p. 17.

⁸⁵ "Cummeragunja Stir: Charge of Enticing Residents to Leave Mission: Defendant Convicted and Dismissed," *Riverine Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.

⁸⁶ "Aboriginal Unrest," *Argus*, March 4, 1939, p. 3. & "Aboriginal Station Trouble," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4, 1939, p. 17. Davidson requested if there would be a report and an independent inquiry, while Lawson asked whether Gollan would inquire if the protest was due to one individual and if steps would be taken to avoid this happening again

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Don Aitkin, 'Bruxner, Sir Michael Frederick (1882–1970)', *ADB*, 7, (MUP, 1979),

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bruxner-sir-michael-frederick-5409> & "Crossing the Board," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.

⁹⁰ "New South Wales Parliamentary Debates, May 2, 1939 (158: 4332)," Parliament of NSW, available from [http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hanstrans.nsf/V3ByKey/LA19390502/\\$File/LA19390502.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hanstrans.nsf/V3ByKey/LA19390502/$File/LA19390502.pdf)

and that he was quite convinced everything was being done to help them and if not for 'outside interference' they would be happier at the Station.⁹¹ In spite of the support shown by Davidson and Lawson, the issue was that they were lone voices inside the State Assembly and could realistically do very little without wide support.⁹² The Victorian groups may not all have been completely united, but one of the main reasons the walk-off failed was the wide spread lack of interest by the leaders of the NSW Government.⁹³

The Government deflected the pressure by stating they had held an inquiry and committed to reforming the APB through legislation and administration, which was approved by the expert anthropologists.⁹⁴ Premier Stevens even noted in June in response to the petition containing hundreds of Victorian signatures, that 'the real "cure" was to introduce the new legislation'.⁹⁵ In September, the Premier's Department informed Burdeu, Brown and others who wrote to the Premier that this new legislation would be the Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Bill.⁹⁶ With the outbreak of World War II, the NSW Government was able to operate without too much difficulty, as Aboriginal affairs were now insignificant in the face of the world's problem.⁹⁷ Although the bureaucracy was still supported, the walk-off had brought unprecedented attention in the Australian press and debate in the NSW and Victorian parliaments, which hastened the NSW Government's reconstruction of the APB as the 'Aborigines Welfare Board' under the new 1940 amended Act.⁹⁸

Conclusion

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² "Stir Among Blacks: 70 Leave Station," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks Flee Across the Border: Were Alarmed by Rumors," *The Newcastle Sun*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Exodus Of Blacks At Border," *Sun*, February 6, 1939, p. 1. & "Aborigines Flee From Reserve: Fear Children Would Be taken from Them," *Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 13. Even the Leader of the Opposition Jack Lang despite receiving representation from the AAL along with Stevens in request for aid appears to have done nothing to support the protest.

⁹³ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 52-53.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 405. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Stevens also decided against including Aboriginal representatives in the APB, despite what the Melbourne groups wanted.

⁹⁶ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, Sydney, 13 September 1939, Document Number 1392.

⁹⁷ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 172-173. & Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 118. However the war helped to allow Aboriginals to join the work force in all states to meet the needs of the war effort, which included the over 1000 Aboriginal Anzacs fought in the Second AIF.

⁹⁸ Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeruogunga," p. 63.

When the Cummeragunja residents crossed the Murray River from NSW into Victoria they brought the attention of their plight to two different cities, Melbourne and Sydney. Throughout the interwar years, particularly the 1930s, the focus on Aboriginal Australians by a great number of groups at the time was increasing in both cities, especially driven by the politics at the time. In Melbourne the support was clearly more well developed with the former Cummeragunja residents, particularly Cooper and Tucker, creating a series of white allies including Burdeu, Baillie and the unions. When the walk-off occurred, Melbourne became the main base for help. Largely influenced by the former Cummeragunja residents a public campaign was created to provide aid to the protesters and apply pressure to the Victorian Government to provide help. Without the influence from Aboriginals from Cummeragunja the organisations from Sydney provided very little aid and there was little local pressure on the NSW APB and Government. This was not the only factor. The NSW Government believed too much in their bureaucracy to create any great change, and for years had overlooked the controversy surrounding the APB administration, ignoring the large number of demands from Melbourne related to the walk-off. Despite the NSW Government's rejections of the demands of Aboriginal leaders and their allies in Melbourne, their campaign did bear fruit. It resulted in creating enough public awareness that the bureaucracy had to be reformed, and it proved to two State Governments that Aboriginals, with increasing support from white allies, could sustain a public protest.

CHAPTER THREE

“GO FOR IT, BOYS. NOW IS YOUR CHANCE TO LEAVE THE RESERVE. I WILL GET ALL THE PUBLICITY I WANT NOW.”¹ THE WALK-OFF IN METROPOLITAN AND RURAL NEWSPAPERS.



This is only a small sample of the coverage of the walk-off in the Australian press.²

Aboriginal activist, Jack Patten, was said to have shouted the above statement on February 3rd 1939 to the Cummeragunja residents after Moama police arrested him for an inflammatory speech he made at the station. The statement was brought to public notice in March 1939 during his subsequent criminal trial on the charge of inciting Aboriginal residents to leave Cummeragunja the previous month. Patten clearly understood the power of the press to generate sympathy and support for the Aboriginal cause. The walk-off was reported in newspapers not only in NSW and Victoria, but across Australia and the Tasman Sea, into New Zealand. In fact Patten's trial was a widely reported event, with this statement

¹ "Mission Natives Frightened: Man Convicted and Discharged," *The Age*, March 11, 1939, p. 18.; "N.S.W. Mission Station: Man Convicted," *The Argus*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Stir: Charge of Enticing Residents to Leave Mission: Defendant Convicted and Dismissed," *Riverine Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Mission Natives Frightened: Man Convicted and Discharged," *Shepparton Advertiser*, March 13, 1939, p. 2.; "Aboriginal Reserves: Incitement to Leave. Patten Convicted," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 12. & "Enticed Aborigines From Mission: Sydney Man Freed On Bond," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5.

² Images taken from "Nazis Behind Panic: Why Aborigines Fled Camp: Colonies Aim," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1. (Left) "Aborigines Adamant in Ban on Camp," February 16, 1939, *The Herald*, p. 2. (Right)

and lengthy coverage of it appearing in Melbourne's *The Age*, *The Argus* and the *Weekly Times*, local newspapers the *Riverine Herald* and *Shepparton Advertiser*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.³ Recent evidence has emerged revealing new and interesting facts concerning the relationship between the walk-off and the press. This is not only limited to how far reaching news of the protest spread, but also to the receptivity to Aboriginal issues of the press. The bureaucracy attempted to contain the significance and seriousness of the walk-off as well as provide their narrative of why the protest occurred. However there were new challenges for the bureaucracy as the AAL and its members William Cooper, Arthur Burdeu, George Patten were issuing statements to the press to counter McQuiggan and the NSW APB. This increasing interest in the media for Aboriginal matters led to many newspapers keeping the walk-off in the public eye and allowed public pressure to be placed on the NSW and Victorian Governments as well as the NSW APB.

Spreading the News?

It is unlikely that Jack Patten could have foreseen how far reaching the news of the walk-off would be, as articles of the protest spread across Australia. In the past few decades it was believed that news of the protest was only featured in newspapers in Sydney, Melbourne, Dubbo and the local papers such as the *Riverine Herald* and *Shepparton News*. My own research has shown that news of the protest was much more significant and widespread, featuring in over fifty different newspapers. The coverage of the protest ranged quite differently in terms of the length of the reports, the frequency of the coverage, and the ideological focus. In Sydney, there was a large amount of coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Sun*, while the coverage was brief in the *Daily News* and the *Daily Telegraph* initially.⁴ The walk-off was reported sympathetically by

³ "Mission Natives Frightened," *Age*, March 11, 1939, p. 18.; "N.S.W. Mission Station," *Argus*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Stir," *Riverine Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Mission Natives Frightened," *Shepparton Advertiser*, March 13, 1939, p. 2.; "Aboriginal Reserves," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 12. & "Enticed Aborigines From Mission," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5.

⁴ "Nazis Behind Panic: Why Aborigines Fled Camp: Colonies Aim," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.; "80 Natives Stampede In Fear "Man Arrested And Charged," *The Daily Telegraph*, February, 7, 1939, p. 2.; "N.S.W. Aborigines want a "new deal". By A Daily Telegraph Special Representative," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.; "Exodus Of Blacks At Border," *The Sun*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Natives Want More Food," *The Sun*, February 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Firm, Food Short," *The Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Cross Murray Again," *The Sun*, May 18, 1939, p. 2.; "Libel Claim

three extreme left-wing newspapers in Sydney, *The Worker's Weekly*, *The Australian Worker* and the *Tribune*.⁵ Three reports were also included in the extreme right press *The Publicist* from March to May and, briefly, in the Nationalist magazine *The Bulletin*.⁶ One newspaper, *Our AIM* included an article, and despite being published in Sydney was dispatched in the local areas where the walk-off occurred.⁷ The Melbourne press provided effective coverage on the protest from its beginning to its end through newspapers *The Age*, *The Argus* and *The Herald*.⁸ Another, *The Weekly Times*, produced only three articles on the walk-off.⁹ There was also coverage in the Communist newspaper the *Worker's Voice*, the Melbourne University newspaper *Farrago* and the Catholic paper the *Advocate*.¹⁰

Fails Aborigine's Action Over Article," *The Sun*, August 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines in Flight: Fear of Compound," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1939, p. 11.; "Aborigines Welfare: Superintendent Appointed," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Conditions at Station Criticised," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Who Left Station: Investigation Sought," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Aboriginal Station Trouble. 'Largely Due to One Man,'" *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4, 1939, p. 17.; "Aboriginal Reserves," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Leave Station: Families Cross Border to Victoria," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17.; "District Court," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1939, p. 9.; "District Court. Before Judge Hill and a jury. - In No. 1 Court. - At 10am: Patten v Labor Daily Ltd., and anor," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 26, 1939, p. 5. & "Libel Claim Fails. Aborigine's Suit," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9, 1939, p. 20.

⁵ W. Cooper, "Aborigines Want A Royal Commission," *The Australian Worker*, May 10, 1939, p. 15.; "The Victorian Worker: Conditions of Aborigines," *The Australian Worker*, July 12, 1939, p. 13.; "We Have Our Own National Minority," *Tribune*, October 31, 1939, p. 3. & "First Mass Strike of Aborigines: Treated like Animals- Govt. Tried To Hush Up Affair by Arrests," *The Workers' Weekly*, February 28, 1939, p. 4.

⁶ "Political Points," *The Bulletin*, February 15, 1939, p. 16.; "Arrest of J.T. Patten," *The Publicist*, March 1, 1939, p. 16.; "J.T. Patten Convicted," *The Publicist*, April 1, 1939, p. 7. & "Patten V. 'The Daily News'," *The Publicist*, May 1, 1939, p. 3.

⁷ C. Presnell and A. Peterson, "CUMMERAGUNJA-BARMAH," *Our AIM: A Monthly Record of the Aborigines' Inland Mission of Australia*, March 16, 1939, p. 9.

⁸ "Sanctuary in Victoria: Rumors Stampede Aborigines," *Age*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Cumeragunga Blacks," *Age*, February 10, 1939, p. 15.; "No title," *Age*, March 2, 1939, p. 11.; "Mission Natives Frightened," *Age*, March 11, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines' Case: Students Urge Inquiry," *Age*, April 18, 1939, p. 6.; "News Of The Day: Aboriginal Wit," *Age*, April 20, 1939, p. 10.; "News from the Country: Echuca," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; "Training, Not Old Clothes: Plea for Aborigines," *Age*, June 1, 1939, p. 17.; "Border Aborigines," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 10.; "Investigation Promised: Sustenance for Aborigines," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "News in Brief," *Age*, August 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Sustenance To Cease: Aborigines Plight," *Age*, October 12, 1939, p. 12.; "Stir Among Blacks: 70 Leave Station," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks Likely to Return: Left N.S.W.," *Argus*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Welfare of Blacks: Blacks' Grievances," *Argus*, February 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Welfare of Blacks: Why Blacks Left," *Argus*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Restless Aborigines," *Argus*, February 11, 1939, p. 33.; "Aborigines' Grievances," *Argus*, February 21, 1939, p. 3.; "Why the Blacks Left: Meeting at Camp, Shepparton," *Argus*, February 27, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks' Request," *Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Aboriginal Unrest: Natives Leave Station," *Argus*, March 4, 1939, p. 3.; "N.S.W. Mission Station," *Argus*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Blacks' Grievances," *Argus*, April 19, 1939, p. 11.; "Crossing the Board: N.S.W. Aborigines," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines' Complaint," *Argus*, May 19, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines' Conditions," *Argus*, June 24, 1939, p. 3.; "Privations Suffered: Blacks Defiant," *Argus*, July 25, 1939, p. 15.; "Black Create Problem: Relief Claims," *Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23.; "Blacks Want School," *Argus*, October 12, 1939, p. 8.; "Aborigines Adamant," *Herald*, February 16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives Left Mission," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Blacks Refuse to Go Back: Plight In Camp," *Herald*, July 24, 1939, p. 18. & "Aborigines At Barmah: Sustenance And School Sought," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.

⁹ "Aborigines Leave Mission Station As Protest," *Weekly Times*, February 11, 1939, p. 5.; "Enticed Aborigines From Mission," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5. & "Just a few lines to let you know. - A Glance Around The News," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6.

¹⁰ "The Natives of Cumeragunja," *Advocate*, May 25, 1939, p. 8.; "Aborigine Talks to Labour Club," *Farrago*, April 26, 1939, p. 4. & M. Tucker, "'Half Caste Aborigine' [Margaret Tucker], 'Conditions at Cumeragunja'," *Workers' Voice*, March 1, 1939 quoted in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Crowns Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 160-161. & quoted in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 116-117.

Rural coverage in NSW ranged from single reports to continuous features. There were many single reports of the walk-off throughout a number of rural NSW newspapers. These include: in Northern NSW *The Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, *The Delegate Argus*, the *Glen Innes Examiner* in New England, *The Inverell Times*; *The Gloucester Advocate* at the mid-north coast; *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, the *National Advocate* in Bathurst, west of Sydney; *The Newcastle Sun*; *The North West Champion* in Moree in the far north of NSW; *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* in the far north of NSW in Coraki; *The Riverine Grazier* in Hay; the *Singleton Argus* north-west of Newcastle; the *Tweed Daily* from Murwillumbah on the NSW side of NSW/Queensland; and the *Wellington Times* west of Sydney.¹¹

Other NSW rural coverage included multiple stories related to the protest. For example *The Barrier Miner* in Broken Hill in the far west of NSW reported stories from Melbourne on the walk-off twice in early February.¹² The *Daily Advertiser* in Wagga Wagga provided coverage throughout February and briefly in May.¹³ The *Daily Examiner* in Grafton only reported on the walk-off in March, and May at the second walk-off.¹⁴ In Dubbo, there were two newspapers *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* and the *Dubbo Dispatch* that briefly mentioned the walk-off.¹⁵ The other Newcastle newspaper the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* reported on the walk-off continuously for nine months from February

¹¹ "Aborigines Flee: Fear Establishment of Compound; Manager Denies Allegations," *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Real Aboriginal Wit," *Delegate Argus*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aboriginal Station: Natives Leave for Victoria," *Glen Innes Examiner*, April 29, 1939, p. 1.; "Treatment of Aborigines," *Gloucester Advocate*, March 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines Scared. Abandon Camp. Untrue Statements Circulated," *Inverell Times*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Help For Aborigines," *Maitland Daily Mercury*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Aborigines Flee: Fears of Mission Station: 70 Leave Arrested," *National Advocate*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.; "Blacks Flee Across the Border: Were Alarmed by Rumors," *Newcastle Sun*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Latest Telegraphic And Cable News: Aborigines Defiant: A.P. Board Management Criticised," *North West Champion*, February 9, 1939, p. 2.; "Latest Telegrams," *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, February 10, 1939, p. 4.; "Doings in Different Districts. Pars from all Part," *Riverine Grazier*, February 10, 1939, p. 1.; "Protest By Aborigines: Better Treatment Demanded," *Singleton Argus*, October 4, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines Feared 'Compound' And Fled," *Tweed Daily*, February 7, 1939, p. 6. & "Aborigines Disturbances: Result of Bad Administration," *Wellington Times*, February 9, 1939, p. 1.

¹² "350 Aborigines Vacate Native Station," *Barrier Miner*, February 6, 1939, p. 1. & "Blacks Likely To Return Own Camp," *Barrier Miner*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.

¹³ "Aborigines Flee: From New South Wales to Victoria: Alarmed by Rumors," *Daily Advertiser*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Aborigines Flee: Inquiry Demanded: Into Treatment at Station," *Daily Advertiser*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Exodus of Aborigines: Must Return to Station or Miss Rations," *Daily Advertiser*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.; "Exodus of Aborigines: Return Expected," *Daily Advertiser*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.; "Why Blacks Left Camp," *Daily Advertiser*, February 28, 1939, p. 7. & "Aboriginal Camp: Trouble Over Food Supplies," *Daily Advertiser*, May 19, 1939, p. 1.

¹⁴ "Aborigines' Camp: Only Six Families Return," *Daily Examiner*, March 14, 1939, p. 5. & "Food Dispute: Natives Cross Border," *Daily Examiner*, May 19, 1939, p. 3.

¹⁵ "Aborigines' Progressive Association: Meeting of Protest To-night," *Dubbo Dispatch*, February 10, 1939, p. 1. & "Aborigines Protest: Ill-treatment Allegations," *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, February 9, 1939, p. 3.

to October.¹⁶ The *Northern Star* in Lismore covered the protest throughout February and May.¹⁷ The *Riverine Herald* published in the Murray Shire in NSW and the Shire of Campaspe in Victoria provided lengthy detail and articles because it was a local newspaper and close to the protest.¹⁸ Similar to some of the NSW rural press, there were those which only covered the walk-off briefly, for example the only mention of anything related to the protest from the *Shepparton Advertiser* was the news of Jack Patten's conviction.¹⁹ Another, *The Horsham Times* in Western Victoria, only reported on the start of the first and second walk-off.²⁰ Although only publishing one story the *Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journey* provided an interesting piece of journalism where J.C. Fordyce described the walk-off in humane terms.²¹ The most in-depth piece of Victorian rural journalism on the walk-off was the detailed articles in the *Shepparton News*.²²

At the same time, news of the protest spread beyond the borders from NSW and Victoria into other states and territories, showing how interesting the news of

¹⁶ "To-day's News," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines' Flight to Victoria Demand Inquiry into Camp Administration: Manager Denies Charges," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Return – or No Rations": Ultimatum to Aborigines: Board Supports Manager," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Return – or No Rations": League Will Help Natives," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Mission Stations: 'Should Be Run By Aborigines,'" *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 9, 1939, p. 16.; "Inquiry Awaited: Aborigines Who Left State," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 14, 1939, p. 8.; "Still On Other Side of Murray: Cummeragunja Aborigines," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Leave Station: Claim They Are Victimised: Trouble Over Food," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, May 19, 1939, p. 27. & "Aborigines Protest: Better Treatment Demanded," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, October 3, 1939, p. 6.

¹⁷ "Aborigines Leave Compound: Crossed Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, February 7, 1939, p. 9.; "Aborigines' Flight," *Northern Star*, February 14, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Run Short of Food," *Northern Star*, February 17, 1939, p. 1. & "Aborigines Cross Murray River Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, May 19, 1939, p. 14.

¹⁸ "Stir at Cummeragunja: Seventy Residents Leave Station," *Riverine Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Stir," *Riverine Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Personal: Cummeragunja Natives Returning," *Riverine Herald*, March 14, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja Rumors Denied," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aboriginal Protection: Cummeragunja and Walcha Stations Mentioned," *Riverine Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 2. & "Cummeragunja Exodus: Report of Natives Leaving Denied," *Riverine Herald*, May 22, 1939, p. 2.

¹⁹ "Mission Natives Frightened," *Shepparton Advertiser*, March 13, 1939, p. 2.

²⁰ "Aborigines Desert Station: Alleged 'Tyrannical Administration': 'Trouble Fomented by Agitator,' Says Manager," *The Horsham Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 3. & "Aborigines Seek inquiry By Government: Into Conditions at Station," *The Horsham Times*, May 19, 1939, p. 2.

²¹ J. C. Fordyce, "Cummeragunja: Aboriginal Problem In Miniature: Why the Natives Crossed The River," *Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journey*, October 11, 1939, p. 18. & 'White Fellow,' "Correspondence (To the Editor)," *Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journey*, October 25, 1939, p. 4.

²² "Exodus From Cummeragunja: 'Persecuted By Manager,' Says Natives: 'Misled By Agitator,' Says Manager," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 7.; "Still Across River: Cummeragunja Blacks: Moves For Inquiry," *Shepparton News*, April 6, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 8.; "Aborigines Complain: Victimisation Alleged," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 8. & "Help For Blacks: Inquiry On Cummeragunja Camp," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 8.

the protest was to the Australian public. This was the case in the ACT's *The Canberra Times* reporting on the walk-off in early February.²³ This was also seen in the coverage in Queensland. In Brisbane the protest featured in three newspapers *The Courier-Mail*, the *Worker* and *The Telegraph* as well as in Charters Towers' *The Northern Miner* and Townsville's *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, which were written in similar fashion.²⁴ News of the protest even spread as far west as Western Australia, in publications in the *Kalgoorlie Miner* and Perth's *The West Australian*.²⁵ The walk-off was also reported in a South Australian newspaper in Adelaide called the *News* in two articles in February at the start of the first walk-off and in May during the second walk-off.²⁶ In Tasmania the walk-off was reported in February in three newspapers from three different locations, in the *Advocate* from Burnie, *Examiner* from Launceston and *The Mercury* from Hobart.²⁷ Only the *Mercury* reported on the second walk-off.²⁸ News spread further east than originally thought, as there were three very detailed articles on the walk-off in three different newspapers in New Zealand, one in Wellington, the *Evening Post*, and two in Auckland, the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Auckland Star*.²⁹

The walk-off had been an area of focus for the press largely in February, and in late April and early to mid-May when the second walk-off happened to a lesser extent, with reports of it appearing in articles throughout the year.³⁰ The fact the protest still attracted so much press support in spite of other significant events

²³ "Aborigine Leave: Crossed into Victoria," *The Canberra Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 4. & "Aborigines: Expected to Return to Station," *The Canberra Times*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.

²⁴ "Blacks' Change of Citizenship: Mission Grievance Ignored," *The Courier-Mail*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Near and Far," *Daily Mercury*, February 24, 1939, p. 3.; "Absconding Aborigines," *The Northern Miner*, February 9, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Flee From Reserve: Fear Children Would Be taken from Them," *The Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 13.; "Natives Will Return to Aboriginal Station if Conditions," *The Telegraph*, February 14, 1939, p. 9.; "Absconding Aborigines: Party of 70 Change State," *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, February 8, 1939, p. 7. & "Here There Everywhere," *Worker*, February 14, 1939, p. 13.

²⁵ "Alarmed Aborigines: Flee From Station," *Kalgoorlie Miner*, February 7, 1939, p. 3. & "Aborigines Uneasy. Flight from Native Station," *The West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19.

²⁶ "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray: Fear Loss of Their Children," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7. & "Natives Again Cross River: Victimised, They Say," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.

²⁷ "300 Aborigines Leave Mission," *Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 5.; "Abandoned the Reserve: Aborigines Scared by Rumours," *Examiner*, February 6, 1939, p. 3. & "Natives Leave Station: Fear of Compound," *The Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.

²⁸ "Mainland Notes: Plight of Aborigines," *Mercury*, July 25, 1939, p. 6.

²⁹ "Natives Leave: Settlement in N.S.W.: Nazi Agents Blamed Charged By Newspapers [From Our Own Correspondent]," *Auckland Star*, February 18, 1939, p. 11.; "Defiant Natives: Flight From Station: Scared By False Rumours (From 'The Post's' Representative)," *Evening Post*, February 16, 1939, p. 15. & "Defiant Natives Dwellings Deserted: Fear of Treatment: False Rumours Blamed [From Our Own Correspondent]," *New Zealand Herald*, February 25, 1939, p. 19.

³⁰ Many of these newspapers have conflicting reports of how many left the station ranging from 70, 80, 100, 300 and even as high as 350. What was interesting was that many of the articles were similarly written, particularly those in the rural papers that largely took much of their information from the Sydney and Melbourne press.

happening at this time was impressive and revealed how interested the Australian press was in this protest.

The stories of contemporary racism and the so-called Nazi connection

However not all of this press coverage was what Jack Patten would have wanted. This was especially the case in Sydney with the *Daily News* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The most notorious coverage was from the *Daily News*, which published a story on February 7th of Nazis agents being behind the protest to provide material of Australian mistreatment of native people for the German press to lay claims for the return of New Guinea.³¹ This claim of Nazi involvement was most likely due to Jack Patten's connection to the Australia First movement, who used the *Publicist* newspaper to spread their fascist sympathy message in Sydney.³² One of the men behind the *Publicist*, William Miles, not only supported Aboriginal rights but also, in September 1937, endorsed Nazi Germany's claims for the return of New Guinea.³³ It was no surprise that the *Daily News* sided with McQuiggan and the NSW APB, as many comments from the chairman of the Board, William John MacKay, were included. MacKay referred to McQuiggan as one of their 'most efficient and sympathetic officers'.³⁴ It was interesting that A. W. Thompson, a supporter of Aboriginal activist William Ferguson, and vice-president of the Aborigines' Citizenship Committee provided statements in this article where he stated Patten did not represent any recognised Aboriginal organisation in NSW.³⁵ The result of this was Jack Patten being fearful he would be charged with treason.³⁶

³¹ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1. It did mention Patten and Cooper's statements that the protest had occurred because of intimidation, victimisation, and starvation with food urgently needed.

³² Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 – 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 403. & Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 252.

³³ David S. Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime: Australian Enthusiasts For Hitler's Germany* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2012), p. 66.; Chris Cunneen, 'Miles, William John (1871–1942)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 10, (MUP, 1986), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/miles-william-john-7576>. & Craig Munro, 'Stephensen, Percy Reginald (1901–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 12, (MUP, 1990), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stephensen-percy-reginald-8645>.

³⁴ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 403. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 252.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Alec Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (Ronin Films, 1983), 47 minute mark.

Another interesting newspaper report was the Labor broadsheet *Daily Telegraph*. Although in the past it was supportive of Aboriginal causes, it stated the protest had resulted from the “unfounded idea” that the endowment and food relief assistance were to be removed from Aboriginal parents, and even dismissed how much power the NSW APB had over Aboriginal people.³⁷ On February 10th the *Daily Telegraph* published a report from a special representative on NSW Aboriginals wanting a new deal following the 100 who left Cummeragunja in a “bloodless rebellion”.³⁸ It referred to the protesters as having simple minds, and was not only supportive of McQuiggan as a “humane administrator”, but also used many of his critical comments about the Aboriginal population, his statements on how conditions had improved and his lies about much land was leased to white farms.³⁹ It was through these two newspapers that historians began to argue that this represented the entirety of the press coverage. Heather Goodall in *Invasion to Embassy* described how politically inflammatory the coverage of the walk-off was in the *Daily News* with the claims of a Nazi connection, and that much of the press described the protesters similar to the *Daily Telegraph* report as primitive and simple minded.⁴⁰ Like Goodall, Bain Attwood in *Rights for Aborigines* stated when the walk-off began it attracted considerable press reports, however most of it was influenced by contemporary racism.⁴¹ This view was not only limited to historians but also in the documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence* where it stated the rumours in the press of Nazi allegations led to a decline in public sympathy.⁴² But how far did this extend?

The allegations of Nazi involvement and contemporary racism were reported in the *Auckland Star* from its Sydney correspondent, stating that although the *Daily News* charge sounded “fantastic”, it was possible given Australia’s mistreatment of the Aboriginal population and that there had been evidence of Nazis spying

³⁷ “80 Natives Stampede,” *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2. It concluded by stating the arrest of Patten, his £10 bail, and Moama Court date on March 10.

³⁸ “N.S.W. Aborigines want a “new deal,” *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6. Although acknowledging the protest happened because of malnutrition from inadequate weekly rations due to lack of funding for the NSW APB to care for 10,000 aboriginal people, however the report largely ignored and downplayed the issues.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Towards the end it looks like it blamed Aboriginal people for their own sickness.

⁴⁰ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 252.

⁴¹ Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 48.

⁴² Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 46-47 minute mark.

and creating havoc in other countries.⁴³ It appears the *Auckland Star* was influenced by the racial climate as it blamed the protesters for believing false rumours, and focused on McQuiggan's narrative of how lazy the Aboriginal residents were and rich their lives were at Cummeragunja.⁴⁴ In Australia there was only a brief mention of the Nazi allegations in the press, and it was generally discounted. *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, for example, mentioned the allegation of German newspapers using ill-treated Aboriginals as propaganda in support of the return of the New Guinea colonies, but it quoted William Ferguson stating Aboriginals were loyal subjects of the British Crown.⁴⁵ *The Bulletin*, a nationalist magazine, published a short almost hidden description of the walk-off, and reported on the *Daily News's* Nazi plot, discrediting it and compared it to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report linking IRA bombs to a Nazi plot to weaken Britain.⁴⁶ In April, the *Publicist* supported Jack Patten's attempt to sue Labor Daily Limited and Stanley Roy Wilson of the *Daily News* for £400 in damages for alleging that he caused unrest at Cummeragunja to assist Nazi Germany.⁴⁷ When Patten took libel action against *Daily News* he called Thompson as a witness, however Thompson refused to appear and the action failed.⁴⁸

However the walk-off was not only perceived in the context of an increasing war atmosphere and contemporary racism. A number of media outlets also presented the humanitarian angle of the protest. For example, the Sydney left-wing newspaper *The Workers' Weekly* published an article in February that was very supportive of the protesters, asking its readers to aid the Aboriginal strikers, describing the conditions at Cummeragunja, the work of William Cooper, the Patten brothers and the AAL and criticising the NSW Government.⁴⁹ The rural newspaper *The Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journey*, and the communist newspaper *The Tribune* used the walk-off to provide a strong argument for

⁴³ "Natives Leave," *Auckland Star*, February 18, 1939, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Aborigines Protest," *Dubbo Liberal*, February 9, 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁶ "Political," *Bulletin*, February 15, 1939, p. 16.

⁴⁷ "Patten V," *Publicist*, May 1, 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 403. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 252.

⁴⁹ "First Mass Strike of Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, February 28, 1939, p. 4.

Aboriginal rights based on their mistreatment and being a national minority.⁵⁰ The author of *The Goulburn Valley Stock* piece, J.C. Fordyce, even concluded that any Australian who denied equal status to Aboriginals was putting themselves on an Adolf Hitler level of racism.⁵¹ It is also likely that the attraction to the walk-off could have been limited following the other significant newsworthy events in 1939 such as the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War, the sudden deaths of Pope Pius XI in February and the Prime Minister of Australia Joseph Lyons, Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia in mid-March and, of course, the beginning of World War II. Also in January 1939 following a severe drought Victoria experienced its worst bushfires since 1851.⁵² Most press articles do feature McQuiggan's denials of the allegations of mistreatment and headlines including words such as "flee", "fear" and "scared by rumours," but many do not contain the *Daily Telegraph* level of racism.

If the Aboriginal protesters received widespread coverage what about the bureaucracy? How did it respond/react? Heather Goodall has argued that the press, especially in NSW, were heavily influenced by McQuiggan, the NSW APB and white landowners to portray the walk-off as a panic reaction because of outsider agitators who were not interested in the demonstration by the protesters.⁵³ Attwood called the press 'profoundly unsympathetic' and the metropolitan daily newspapers acted as a vehicle for Board propaganda, with only Melbourne's communist newspaper the *Workers' Voice* providing truthful coverage.⁵⁴ It is true McQuiggan attempted to use the media against the protesters, in order to cover-up any blame for his actions and to hide how serious the conditions were at Cummeragunja. The most common tactic was signalling Patten as the troublemaker, agitator or as the Aborigine who had been arrested for panicking the residents into leaving.⁵⁵ McQuiggan's other actions

⁵⁰ Fordyce, "Cummeragunja," *Goulburn Valley Stock*, October 11, 1939, p. 18. & "We Have Our," *Tribune*, October 31, 1939, p. 3.

⁵¹ Fordyce, "Cummeragunja," *Goulburn Valley Stock*, October 11, 1939, p. 18.

⁵² Report (No. 2) 1939 1 529 quoted in T.J. Strehlow and C.W. Ford, *Index to Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1919-1939* (Melbourne: Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, 1994), p. 7. The bushfires resulted in 71 deaths, 69 mills burned and millions of acres of forestry were either destroyed or badly damaged.

⁵³ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 252.

⁵⁴ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 48.

⁵⁵ "Sanctuary in Victoria," *Age*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir Among Blacks," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigine Leave," *Canberra Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 4.; "Why Blacks," *Daily Advertiser*, February 28, 1939, p. 7.; "80 Natives Stampede," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "N.S.W. Aborigines want a "new deal"," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.; "Abandoned the Reserve," *Examiner*, February 6, 1939, p. 3.; "Alarmed Aborigines," *Kalgoorlie Miner*, February

were downplaying the seriousness of protest by stating to the press that their absence was similar to a holiday as they had plenty of rations, they would be welcomed back when they returned, probably in a week, and the statements made against him, the station and the APB were untrue.⁵⁶ McQuiggan and the Board also defended each other in the face of criticism in the *Daily News* and *Daily Telegraph*.⁵⁷ The NSW bureaucracy had also influenced the coverage by the New Zealand press, who appeared to have largely sided with them.⁵⁸ But there were problems. Not only did the denials by both on the second walk-off occurring appear to be desperate, but they had to contend with many Aboriginal leaders in AAL using the press to stand against the bureaucracy.⁵⁹

Throughout the year, the members of the AAL had utilised the press to help the protesters by creating public awareness about the walk-off and to counter the propaganda spread by McQuiggan and the NSW APB.⁶⁰ This was only in the *Worker's Voice*, but from it Aboriginal leaders and their allies found support from many other newspapers.⁶¹ When the walk-off started in February, William Cooper defended the protesters by drawing attention to their lack of food and

7, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Leave Station," *Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "'Return – or No Rations': Ultimatum," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Blacks Flee Across the Border," *Newcastle Sun*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir at Cummeragunja," *Riverine Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Exodus From Cummeragunja," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 7.; "Still Across River," *Shepparton News*, April 6, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Aborigines in Flight," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1939, p. 11.; "Aborigines Flee From Reserve," *Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 13.; "Aborigines Feared," *Tweed Daily*, February 7, 1939, p. 6. & "Aborigines Uneasy," *West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* McQuiggan's statements would be taken in newspapers in NSW, Victoria, ACT, South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia.

⁵⁷ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1. & "N.S.W. Aborigines want a 'new deal'," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.

⁵⁸ "Defiant Natives," *Evening Post*, February 16, 1939, p. 15. & "Defiant Natives Dwellings Deserted," *New Zealand Herald*, February 25, 1939, p. 19.

⁵⁹ "News From the Country," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254.; "Denies Natives," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3. & "Just a few lines," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6.

⁶⁰ "300 Aborigines," *Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 5.; "Blacks' Request," *Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Blacks' Change of Citizenship," *Courier-Mail*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Adamant," *Herald*, February 16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines At Barmah," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Desert Station," *Horsham Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Mainland Notes," *Mercury*, July 25, 1939, p. 6.; "'Return – or No Rations': League," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Inquiry Awaited," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 14, 1939, p. 8.; "Still On Other Side of Murray," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Natives Again Cross River," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Leave Compound: Crossed Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, February 7, 1939, p. 9.; "Aborigines' Flight," *Northern Star*, February 14, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Run Short of Food," *Northern Star*, February 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Personal," *Riverine Herald*, March 14, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Complain," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Help For Blacks," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Natives Firm," *Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Leave Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17.; "Natives Will Return," *Telegraph*, February 14, 1939, p. 9. & "Aborigines Leave Mission," *Weekly Times*, February 11, 1939, p. 5.

⁶¹ Tucker, "Conditions at Cummeragunja," *Workers' Voice*, March 1, 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 160-161. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 116-117.

the fact that conditions at Cummeragunja were the worst in history.⁶² In May, Cooper wrote a letter to *The Australian Worker* to explain the demands for an impartial enquiry/Royal Commission into the treatment of Aboriginal people in NSW, or the Board must be reconstituted with Aboriginal representation.⁶³ The *Daily News*, although influenced by McQuiggan and the APB, still included Cooper and Jack Patten's message to all metropolitan newspapers, which described the motivation being intimidation, victimisation, and starvation as well as the urgent need for food, and demands for an immediate inquiry.⁶⁴

During the later months of the walk-off George Patten had started to use the press as a tool for Aboriginal rights and to help the protest. This can be seen in April when he emerges as an activist in his own right, separate from his more (in)famous brother, Jack. George managed to earn the support of the Melbourne University newspaper *Farrago* following his visit and speech on Aboriginal rights.⁶⁵ Also George's visit and speech at the Spotswood workshops not only earned his support from the workers, but was also published in Melbourne's *The Age* and the *Delegate Argus*.⁶⁶ When the second walk-off occurred George had taken over Cooper's role in the press, by announcing to the newspaper why residents again walked off, the suffering of the protesters, and issued the demands of land, education and even comprising a petition to the Federal Government for a Royal Commission.⁶⁷ Throughout both walk-offs, Arthur Burdeu, the only white man in the AAL, constantly spoke to the press in an effort to raise not only attention to the protest but to also provide the truth in the face of McQuiggan, and the NSW APB's cover-ups, and leveling some criticism of the Victorian Government.⁶⁸ Despite Ferguson and the Dubbo press not offering any

⁶² "Stir Among Blacks," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Welfare of Blacks," *Argus*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Abandoned the Reserve," *Examiner*, February 6, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Leave Station," *Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Conditions at Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Uneasy," *West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19. & "First Mass Strike of Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, February 28, 1939, p. 4. Cooper's statements spread to Melbourne, Hobart, Launceston, Sydney and Perth, as well as clashing with those of McQuiggan and the APB, some of which were in the same article.

⁶³ Cooper, "Aborigines Want," *Australian Worker*, May 10, 1939, p. 15. In *The Australian Worker*, Cooper had also spoke of the mistreatment and indifference of the Manager and the APB to the situation of the Aboriginal people.

⁶⁴ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.

⁶⁵ "Aborigines' Case," *Age*, April 18, 1939, p. 6. & "Aborigine Talks," *Farrago*, April 26, 1939, p. 4.

⁶⁶ "News Of The Day," *Age*, April 20, 1939, p. 10. & "Real Aboriginal," *Delegate Argus*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.

⁶⁷ "Investigation Promised," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "The Victorian Worker," *Australian Worker*, July 12, 1939, p. 13.; "Blacks Refuse to Go Back," *Herald*, July 24, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines Protest," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, October 3, 1939, p. 6. & "Protest By Aborigines," *Singleton Argus*, October 4, 1939, p. 1.

⁶⁸ "News from the Country," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; "Blacks' Request," *Argus*, March 1, 1939, p. 7.; "Crossing the Board," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines' Complaint," *Argus*, May 19, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Adamant," *Herald*, February

further support, at least they spoke against the Nazi story and provided some criticism of the Board.⁶⁹ It is clear that the news of the walk-off was not just dominated by McQuiggan and APB's propaganda, as the Aboriginals, Aboriginal organisations and white allies were beginning to utilise the press to help with Aboriginal welfare by getting the general public's understanding of why the walk-off happened and using it to place pressure on the NSW and Victorian Governments to act.

This would not be possible without the interest of the city press and the involvement of former Cummeragunja residents, particularly in Melbourne. As Melbourne had three excellent newspapers that covered the walk-off from beginning to end: *The Age*, *The Argus*, and *The Herald*. The combination of the AAL activists and the newspapers interest in providing coverage made it possible to place pressure on the NSW and Victorian Governments. The coverage in the *Weekly Times*, the *Worker's Voice*, *Farrago* and the *Advocate* also allowed for a range of diverse groups to have access to audiences to place pressure on the State Governments.⁷⁰ The Sydney press had its problems as the bureaucracy still had the support of the NSW Government and the NSW APB was very influential and helped to create propaganda in the *Daily News* and the *Daily Telegraph* in February.⁷¹ Also the lack of any of the influential former Cummeragunja leaders meant Sydney did not have that Aboriginal voice that the Melbourne media had. Although there was a large amount of coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Sun*, it was not as impressive and as detailed as in the Melbourne

16, 1939, p. 2.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives Left Mission," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines At Barmah," *Herald*, October 11, 1939, p. 10.; "'Return - or No Rations': League," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Inquiry Awaited," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 14, 1939, p. 8.; "Still On Other Side of Murray," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 17, 1939, p. 12.; "Natives Again Cross River," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines'," *Northern Star*, February 14, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Run," *Northern Star*, February 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Personal," *Riverine Herald*, March 14, 1939, p. 2.; "Cummeragunja," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Complain," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Help For Blacks," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Natives Firm," *Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Leave Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17. & "Natives Will Return," *Telegraph*, February 14, 1939, p. 9.

⁶⁹ "Aborigines' Progressive Association," *Dubbo Dispatch*, February 10, 1939, p. 1. & "Aborigines Protest," *Dubbo Liberal*, February 9, 1939, p. 3.

⁷⁰ "The Natives," *Advocate*, May 25, 1939, p. 8.; "Aborigine Talks," *Farrago*, April 26, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Leave Mission," *Weekly Times*, February 11, 1939, p. 5.; "Enticed Aborigines From Mission," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5.; "Just a few lines," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6. & Tucker, "Conditions at Cummeragunja," *Workers' Voice*, March 1, 1939 quoted in Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 160-161. & quoted in Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 116-117.

⁷¹ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.; "80 Natives Stampede," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2. & "N.S.W. Aborigines want a 'new deal'," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.

counterparts.⁷² The real strength in providing sympathetic coverage of the walk-off was from Sydney's left-wing newspapers *The Worker's Weekly*, *The Australian Worker* and the *Tribune*.⁷³ However *The Australian Worker's* coverage was written by Cooper himself, the *Tribune's* article came in late October when the walk-off was finished, and the *Worker's Weekly* was most likely written in Melbourne.⁷⁴ There was some support from the fascist newspaper *The Publicist* in providing a defense for Jack Patten and some for the protests, and a brief criticism of the Nazi story the Nationalist magazine *The Bulletin*, but neither focused very largely on the walk-off.⁷⁵

Other stories relating to Aboriginal matters at the time

At the same time as the walk-off, newspapers reported on a number of Aboriginal matters that were in the public attention. During January and February there was coverage of mistreatment and the growing requests to improve Aboriginal status. An example of this was the reports from Caroline Kelly, an anthropologist at Sydney University and a prominent supporter of Aboriginal rights, which stated that schemes for improving the social status of Aborigines would remain as 'utopian' without a change of heart in Australians.⁷⁶ An example Kelly quoted from her country tour of NSW was that in many country towns Aborigines were not welcome at church services and had special pews aside set for them.⁷⁷

⁷² "Exodus Of Blacks," *Sun*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Natives Want," *Sun*, February 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Firm," *Sun*, February 16, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines Cross," *Sun*, May 18, 1939, p. 2.; "Libel Claim Fails," *Sun*, August 8, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines in Flight," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1939, p. 11.; "Aborigines Welfare," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Conditions at Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Who Left Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Aboriginal Station Trouble," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4, 1939, p. 17.; "Aboriginal Reserves," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 12.; "Aborigines Leave Station," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17.; "District Court," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 24, 1939, p. 9.; "District Court," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 26, 1939, p. 5. & "Libel Claim Fails," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9, 1939, p. 20.

⁷³ Cooper, "Aborigines Want," *Australian Worker*, May 10, 1939, p. 15.; "We Have Our," *Tribune*, October 31, 1939, p. 3. & "First Mass Strike of Aborigines," *Workers' Weekly*, February 28, 1939, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ "Political," *Bulletin*, February 15, 1939, p. 16.; "Arrest," *Publicist*, March 1, 1939, p. 16.; "J.T. Patten," *Publicist*, April 1, 1939, p. 7. & "Patten V," *Publicist*, May 1, 1939, p. 3.

⁷⁶ "Treatment of Aborigines in N.S. Wales," *Advocate*, January 17, 1939, p. 8.; "The Aborigines: Social Service Plan: Described As Utopian," *Canberra Times*, February 9, 1939, p. 5.; "Status of Aborigines: 'Change of Heart' Needed," *Daily Advertiser*, February 9, 1939, p. 5.; "Aborigines: Unwelcome In Churches: Change of Heart by Whites Needed," *Daily Examiner*, February 9, 1939, p. 5.; "Native Population: 'Not Wanted at Churches'," *Northern Star*, February 9, 1939, p. 6.; "Pews For Natives: 'Whites Object to Them in Church': Social Worker's Plea For New Outlook," *Sun*, February 8, 1939, p. 2. & "Blacks Ostracised By Whites," *Weekly Times*, January 21, 1939, p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Kelly's words were echoed in Burnie's *Advocate*, *The Canberra Times*, *Wagga Wagga's Daily Advertiser*, *Grafton's Daily Examiner*, *Lismore's Northern Star*, *Sydney's The Sun*, and Melbourne's *The Weekly Times* to say a few.

Another more relevant example was the criticism of the NSW APB directed by the socialist and supporter of Aboriginal rights Michael Sawtell. Despite the earlier mention as to whether Sawtell criticised the APB by citing the walk-off as an example of their bad management style he still remains significant because in February, 1939 he was leveling blame at the Board for its failure to address the issues of the Aboriginal population under their duty of care.⁷⁸ Sawtell had also addressed the Australian Workers Union (AWU) representing the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, where he spoke of the deplorable conditions of Aboriginals in NSW and stressed three points.⁷⁹ First, he asked the Convention to assist the Aboriginals to fight for their citizenship; second, he asked for the AWU to ask for representation on the new Aboriginal Welfare Committee that the State Government had proposed to form; and third he asked for a donation of £15 to help pay the deposit on a car to enable an Aboriginal leader to tour NSW to organise and encourage his people.⁸⁰

Conclusion

At Jack Patten's trial in March at Moama, he was alleged to have urged the residents to leave Cummeragunja. It is believed he engineered this 'stunt' to generate widespread publicity for their cause. At the time it would have been impossible for them to imagine how wide the coverage of the walk-off would be. It was reported in over fifty newspapers across Australia: in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, Canberra and Western Australia, as well as spreading to New Zealand. This coverage demonstrated how, at this time, the Australian press was becoming increasingly interested in Aboriginal affairs, especially given how headline grabbing it was that Aboriginals had walked-off a station and crossed

⁷⁸ Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 17.; "The A.W.U. Annual Convention: Afternoon Session. Thursday, 9th February, 1939," *Australian Worker*, March 8, 1939, p. 17.; "Native Affairs: Protection Board Attacked: Incompetence Alleged," *Canberra Times*, February 10, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines Board Criticised," *Daily Examiner*, February 10, 1939, p. 3.; "Aborigines' Board: Allegations of incompetence," *National Advocate*, February 10, 1939, p. 5.; "Citizen Rights: A.W.U. Told of Natives' Aim: 'Acute Racial Complex'," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 10, 1939, p. 14.; "Latest Telegraphic And Cable News: Aborigines Defiant: A.P. Board Management Criticised," *North West Champion*, February 9, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Board Criticised," *Northern Star*, February 10, 1939, p. 8.; "Latest Telegrams," *The Richmond River Herald*, February 10, 1939, p. 4.; "Aborigines' Own Teachers: Appointment Suggested. Appeal For 'Better Deal'," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 27, 1939, p. 12.; "Sad Plight Of Aborigines': Appeal to Members of State Parliament," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 13, 1939, p. 10. & "Aborigines Disturbances: Result of Bad Administration," *Wellington Times*, February 9, 1939, p. 1. Sawtell in Sydney, had an organisation the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship was a critic of the NSW APB, advocated for full citizenship rights for Aborigines, and provided support for Ferguson's APA.

⁷⁹ "The A.W.U. Annual Convention," *Australian Worker*, March 8, 1939, p. 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*. The minutes from the AWU's Annual Convention and importantly Sawtell's statements for Aboriginal rights, were published through their newspaper *The Australian Worker* allowing for the public sphere to know his demands.

into another Australian state. Some of the coverage was not what Patten had hoped for, such as coverage in the *Daily News* and the *Daily Telegraph* featuring elements of contemporary racism. However these publications appear to be rare cases and some newspapers like *The Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journal* and the *Tribune* even put the reports in the context of developing humanitarianism. The press reports also revealed a change in Aboriginal methods of protest where many influential figures were beginning to utilise the press by providing statements to bring the attention of the plight of protesters to the wider audience. It also helped in countering the propaganda that was being put forward by McQuiggan and the NSW APB, as well as to place pressure on the State Governments in NSW and Victoria. This ability to influence the press was also significant in terms of place, for the Aboriginal leaders and white allies, because they made Melbourne their base of operation, where they were able to properly utilise the press. Although there were sympathetic elements in the Sydney press, it was not as effective a vehicle for the protesters as its Melbourne counterpart.

CHAPTER FOUR

“THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO TRUTH IN THE ALLEGATIONS”¹: THE REACTIONS OF THE MANAGER AND THE NSW ABORIGINES PROTECTION BOARD.



William John Mackay, Commissioner of the New South Wales Police Force (1935-1948) and chairman of the NSW APB. An opponent of Arthur James McQuiggan before the walk-off, but sided with the manager during the protest against the Jack Patten and the protesters.²

As the foregoing chapters show, the Cummeragunja walk-off was significant in its scope: the Aboriginal people were becoming increasingly politicised, the support from white Australians was very vocal, and the interest of the press was high. The manager of the Cummeragunja station, Arthur James McQuiggan, and the NSW APB had never witnessed or experienced a mass protest of this kind before where the majority of Aboriginal residents of a station had crossed into another Australian state as a method of demonstration. Many of protesters believed this act alone would force the Board's hand into instituting the changes

¹ "Stir at Cummeragunja: Seventy Residents Leave Station," *Riverine Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 2. Taken from McQuiggan's statements to the press on the reply by the NSW APB on the subject of Aboriginal mistreatment at Cummeragunja.

² Image taken from "Mission and History," PCYC (Police Citizens Youth Clubs), available from <https://www.pycnsw.org.au/mission-history/>

they had requested for decades. The statement above provided by McQuiggan directly from the APB to the Australian press reveals that both were unwilling to change and explain the truth to the wider public believing that the protest would end shortly. However they under-estimated the changes in Australian society and the determination of the Aboriginal residents themselves. This meant that instead of a short protest as predicted by the Board, the strike lasted for nine months. One of the most important outcomes of this event was that the manager of the station—McQuiggan—was sacked: quietly and months after the walk-off concluded. This was an unprecedented action by the NSW APB. The quietness of this response obscured an important point, which was that the methods and techniques incorporated by the Board for dealing with such resistance up to that point were no longer effective. While the response to the walk-off was not what the Aboriginals wanted, and did not recognise their claims or the basis of the protest, the walk-off as well as a series of other controversies around Aboriginal affairs at this time, precipitated an internal crisis: either the Board reform or they were no longer relevant.

This crisis revealed how greatly the Board had fallen. For decades the NSW APB had controlled and dominated the lives of Aboriginal people within NSW as well as being divisive in removing any form of opposition. In the inter-war period opposition to the Board was becoming increasingly vocal, following Aboriginal service in the First World War. In the mid-1920s this was becoming organised by Aboriginal activist Fred Maynard, who used his organisation, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) to criticise the APB's treatment of Aboriginals, by using the speeches and the media, even demanding a Royal Commission into Aboriginal affairs and the abolition of the Board.³ In response the Board, throughout 1925 to 1927, began a campaign to destroy Maynard and his organisation by attacking his character, stating he was not an Aboriginal, attempting to implicate him in a sex scandal and using the police to break up AAPA meetings.⁴ This contributed significantly to the breakup of the AAPA

³ J. Maynard, "Fred Maynard and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA): One God, One Aim, One destiny," *Aboriginal History* 21 (1997): p. 6-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6-12.

through the constant police harassment during the three AAPA annual conferences.⁵

However times had changed, by the 1930s. Where the AAPA was the only organisation of its kind in the 1920s, by the 1930s a number of new Aboriginal lobby groups had emerged such as William Cooper's AAL, and Jack Patten and William Ferguson's APA, as well as the various white Aboriginal support groups in Sydney and Melbourne.⁶ There was cooperation between the leaders of the AAL and APA when they organised the Day of Mourning on Australia's sesquicentenary on January 26th 1938 in Sydney and Melbourne.⁷

In November 1937, the NSW APB faced a new wave of criticism when the NSW Government began a Select Committee Inquiry into the administration of the APB, which revealed to the public and the Government not only how awful conditions were at Cummeragunja but also how the Great Depression had placed increasing pressure on NSW stations and reserves with the resources of the APB.⁸ Although the inquiry lapsed without producing a final report due to the members' disinterest, the revelations had embarrassed the Board.⁹ Another more private investigation was completed in September 1938 by the Public Service Board into the APB. This was damaging but the NSW Government hid the results.¹⁰ As for Cummeragunja, the new manager appointed in mid-1937 was Arthur James McQuiggan who had been transferred from his previous role to

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

⁶ Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 33.; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1999), p. 11.; Fiona Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station: Redrawing Boundaries* (Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 107.; Fiona Davis, "Colouring within the lines: settler colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888-1960s" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 185-186.; Heather Goodall, 'Maynard, Charles Frederick (Fred) (1879-1946)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 15, (MUP, 2000), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/maynard-charles-frederick-fred-11095>; Andrew Markus, *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Wellington, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 6. & John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The origins of Australian Aboriginal activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), p. 2. The 1930s marked a period where other Aboriginal lobby groups were formed across NSW, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia that connected indigenous groups over large areas.

⁷ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 30, 54.; Attwood and Markus, *The Struggle*, p. 12, 63.; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 19.; Markus, *Blood From a Stone*, p. 17. & Paul W. Newbury, *Aboriginal Heroes of the Resistance: From Pemulwuy to Mabo* (Surry Hills: Action for World Development, 1999), p. 29. The Day of Mourning was not only Cooper's idea as another key mover was William Ferguson. William Cooper, Margaret Tucker and Douglas Nicholls were present in Sydney, and Burdeu was in Melbourne.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Diane Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga: Pioneers and Policy," in *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development*, ed. T. Scarlett Epstein and D.H. Penny (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1972), p. 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 115. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 195.

cover up his cruelty to Aboriginal boys.¹¹ This was possible because of the Board's internal conflict. The Chairman of the NSW APB, William John MacKay, and NSW Commissioner of Police called for McQuiggan to be sacked in disgrace following the revelation of his cruelty at Kinchela Boys Home.¹² However McQuiggan was saved from being sacked by the Harkness brothers, B.C. Harkness, the Education Department representative on the APB and E.B. Harkness in the Chief Secretary's Department, who arranged for him to be transferred to Cummeragunja as the new manager.¹³ At Cummeragunja, McQuiggan brought arrogance, threats and violence rather than improvements, which helped to further push the residents towards a public demonstration that would come back to cost the APB dearly.¹⁴

Get Patten

When the walk-off started McQuiggan and the NSW APB focused on Jack Patten as the main instigator of the protest, and were determined to punish him for challenging the Board, just as they had done to Fred Maynard a decade before. These similarities included the Board's past tactics of attacking his character and using the police to undermine activists. In fact McQuiggan's first response was to contact the Moama Police and have both Jack and George arrested and charged with inciting Aboriginals to leave Cummeragunja, in violation of the Aborigines' Protection (Amendment) Act of 1936, which created a chargeable offense for inciting any Aboriginal resident to leave a reserve or station.¹⁵ McQuiggan also

¹¹ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 42.; Attwood and Markus, *Thinking Black*, p. 21.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 109-110.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 188-189.; Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 – 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 140, 297, 390-391.; Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 142, 192, 247.; Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1974), p. 51.; George Nelson and Robynne Nelson, *Dharmalan Dana: An Australian Aboriginal man's 73-year search for the story of his Aboriginal and Indian ancestors* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), p. 202. & Lawrence Joseph Perry, "'Mission Impossible': Aboriginal survival before, during and after the Aboriginal Protection Era" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Newcastle, 2013), p. 181-182. From 1931 to 1937 McQuiggan was in charge of Kinchela where he was known for his drinking and notoriously beating the young Aboriginal boys. However McQuiggan kept his position because of internal conflict within the Board and remained in charge of Kinchela Boys Home until mid-1937. Despite his past mistreatment of Aboriginal residents McQuiggan was transferred to Cummeragunja because he had support from the Harkness brothers who were high-ranking officials of the NSW APB.

¹² *Ibid.*; Aborigines Protection Board (later the Aborigines Welfare Board), Minute Books, Reel 2792, Series 2, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Department of Education, NSW Government. Monthly Board Meeting; February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440. & "Nazis Behind Panic: Why Aborigines Fled Camp: Colonies Aim," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.

¹³ Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 192.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 247. & Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 390-391.

¹⁵ Goodall, *A History of Aboriginal Communities*, p. 401-402.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 251-252. & Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker M.B.E.* (Sydney: URE, 1977), p. 168-169. The 1936

started a media war against Patten, to downplay the significance of the protest by signalling him as the troublemaker, agitator or as the 'Aborigine' who had been arrested for panicking the residents into leaving.¹⁶ As for the NSW APB, they followed McQuiggan's strategy and blamed the walk-off on the 'agitator' Jack Patten, while providing support for McQuiggan.¹⁷ MacKay even defended McQuiggan and in Sydney's *Daily News* was critical of Patten for creating trouble on reserves.¹⁸ This response, siding with McQuiggan was not surprising as one of his key supporters B.C. Harkness was part of the monthly Board meetings, during the period of the walk-off.¹⁹

This decision to side with McQuiggan was also due to the Board's distrust of Jack Patten. In the past the Board attempted to control his access and communication, issuing him a pass to visit NSW Aboriginal stations and reserves, but warned that he should be careful with his actions.²⁰ At a meeting of the APB on February 8th, 1939, with the walk-off having started, feelings towards Jack Patten intensified. The Board cancelled Patten's permit to visit Aboriginal Stations and banned him from visiting any Aboriginal Station or reserve.²¹ During Patten's trial at Moama in March, McQuiggan gave evidence against Jack Patten and had witness

amendments had provided increased power to the managers of the reserves and stations over the lives of the Aboriginal residents.

¹⁶ "Sanctuary in Victoria: Rumors Stampede Aborigines," *The Age*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir Among Blacks: 70 Leave Station," *The Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigine Leave: Crossed into Victoria," *The Canberra Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 4.; "Why Blacks Left Camp," *Daily Advertiser*, February 28, 1939, p. 7.; "80 Natives Stampede In Fear "Man Arrested And Charged," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "N.S.W. Aborigines want a "new deal". By A Daily Telegraph Special Representative," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.; "Abandoned the Reserve: Aborigines Scared by Rumours," *Examiner*, February 6, 1939, p. 3.; "Alarmed Aborigines: Flee From Station," *Kalgoorlie Miner*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Leave Station: Fear of Compound," *The Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "'Return - or No Rations': League Will Help Natives," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Blacks Flee Across the Border: Were Alarmed by Rumors," *Newcastle Sun*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray: Fear Loss of Their Children," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir at Cummeragunja: Seventy Residents Leave Station," *Riverine Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Exodus From Cummeragunja: "Persecuted By Manager," Says Natives: "Misled By Agitator," Says Manager," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 7.; "Still Across River: Cummeragunja Blacks: Moves For Inquiry," *Shepparton News*, April 6, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961: Research and Compiled for Bangerang Cultural Centre Shepparton*, ed. Bill Lumley and Lynne Lumley (Shepparton: Bangerang Cultural Centre, 2002), p. 8.; "Exodus Of Blacks At Border," *The Sun*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines in Flight: Fear of Compound," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1939, p. 11.; "Aborigines Flee From Reserve: Fear Children Would Be taken from Them," *The Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 13.; "Aborigines Feared "Compound" And Fled," *Tweed Daily*, February 7, 1939, p. 6. & "Aborigines Uneasy. Flight from Native Station," *The West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19. McQuiggan's statements would be featured in newspapers in NSW, Victoria, ACT, South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia.

¹⁷ Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 48.

¹⁸ "Nazis Behind Panic," *Daily News*, February 7, 1939, p. 1.

¹⁹ APB, Minute Books, February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440.; APB, Minute Books, March 8, 1939, Document Number 0444-0447.; APB, Minute Books, May 10, 1939, Document Number 0461-0462, 0473.; APB, Minute Books, June 14, 1939, Document Number 0474-0476. & APB, Minute Books, July 12, 1939, Document Number 0478-0480, 0482.

²⁰ APB, Minute Books, December 7, 1938, Document Number 0431. & APB, Minute Books, February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440. For example, at the Board meeting on December 7th 1938 it was stated for that in his ABC radio interview Patten should follow a script in accordance with 'the facts'.

²¹ APB, Minute Books, February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440.

testimonial support from First Constable Arthur McAvoy of the Moama police to help convict Patten for 'inciting' the residents to leave.²² The APB also wanted Patten to be convicted, taking the extraordinary decision at the March meeting to arrange for legal aid to be sent from Sydney to assist the prosecution against him, and raised the subject of his conviction at the next months meeting.²³ But the problem with treating Jack Patten in the same manner as Fred Maynard was that times had changed and it was ultimately counterproductive. Maynard was the voice of the AAPA and represented Aboriginal activism during the 1920s, but Patten did not represent the protesters, as he was not the leader.²⁴ Most importantly, unlike Maynard, constantly attacking Patten did not remove the issue for the Board, which was the Aboriginal protesters camped in Victoria.

The First Walk-off

As for the protesters themselves McQuiggan and the NSW APB used a number of methods to convince the residents to return as quickly as possible. However their methods only hardened the resolve of the protesters and it became a war of attrition.²⁵ At the start of the walk-off, the protesters were hopeful that because of the size and suddenness of the demonstration, the APB would listen to their demands for McQuiggan's dismissal and for an inquiry into Cummeragunja.²⁶ However the APB instead displayed public dishonesty and downplayed the significance of the walk-off in a Saturday radio broadcast on February 4th, by stating 'an agitator' caused the protest and that there were no previous complaints from Cummeragunja's residents.²⁷ The protesters who had access to

²² "Mission Natives Frightened: Man Convicted and Discharged," *Age*, March 11, 1939, p. 18.; "N.S.W. Mission Station: Man Convicted," *Argus*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Treatment of Aborigines," *The Gloucester Advocate*, March 17, 1939, p. 1.; "Cummeragunja Stir: Charge of Enticing Residents to Leave Mission: Defendant Convicted and Dismissed," *Riverine Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 2.; "Mission Natives Frightened: Man Convicted and Discharged," *Shepparton Advertiser*, March 13, 1939, p. 2.; "Aboriginal Reserves: Incitement to Leave. Patten Convicted," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 11, 1939, p. 12. & "Enticed Aborigines From Mission: Sydney Man Freed On Bond," *Weekly Times*, March 18, 1939, p. 5.

²³ APB, Minute Books, March 8, 1939, Document Number 0444-0447. & APB, Minute Books, April 5, 1939, Document Number 0450-0451.

²⁴ Jack Patten was only one man in a collective protest of over 200 people and only one of many Aboriginal activists involved in the walk-off which included William Cooper, Doug Nicholls and Margaret Tucker.

²⁵ Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 78.

²⁶ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 402. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 251-252.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Diane Barwick, "Auntie Ellen: The Pastor's Wife," in *Fighters & Singers: The lives of some Aboriginal women*, ed. Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 190.; State Records NSW: Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Reel 1862, Premiers Letters Received. W. C. Hall, letter, to Premier Bertram Stevens, 3 March 1939, Document Number 1379, 1383. & State Records NSW: Premier Special Bundles: Treatment of Aborigines in NSW, 1936-63, Reel 1862, Premiers Letters Received. H. Hargreaves, to W. C. Hall, 5 March 1939, Document Number 1380-1381, 1384-1386.

a radio were hardened by these lies and pledged to continue until their demands were met.²⁸ McQuiggan had unknowingly made the protesters more resolved in his attempt to force their trusted Pastor, Edwin Atkinson, to remain neutral, which landed the protesters a strong ally, who openly spoke about McQuiggan's mistreatment of the residents.²⁹ But McQuiggan was successful in convincing the Victorian authorities that the protesters were issued with rations on February 2nd and had no need for sustenance, which deprived them of much needed food.³⁰

McQuiggan utilised the press as he went into damage control, attempting to downplay the protest from the very beginning. He stated their absence was comparable to a holiday as they had plenty of rations, and they would soon return in a week.³¹ McQuiggan also denied all the statements made against him, the station and the APB and 'reassured' the protesters that anyone who returned would be welcome.³² In late February McQuiggan continued the narrative of Jack Patten as the one responsible, while presenting himself as a victim who was unable to have the residents adapt to the white man's system, as well as holding onto the belief that the walk-off would end shortly.³³ McQuiggan even resorted to insulting the Aboriginal residents, and presented the Board as the real victims for having to function with limited resources.³⁴ The APB was less vocal than McQuiggan with the press, but were still publicly loyal to McQuiggan, and threatening towards the protesters by informing the press that McQuiggan would be able to "iron out" the difficulties quickly. The Under-Secretary Mr.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 77-78.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Sanctuary in Victoria," *Age*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir Among Blacks," *Argus*, February 6, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigine Leave," *Canberra Times*, February 7, 1939, p. 4.; "80 Natives Stampede," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "N.S.W. Aborigines want a 'new deal'," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.; "Abandoned the Reserve," *Examiner*, February 6, 1939, p. 3.; "Alarmed Aborigines," *Kalgoorlie Miner*, February 7, 1939, p. 3.; "Natives Leave Station," *Mercury*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "'Return - or No Rations': League," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 8, 1939, p. 7.; "Blacks Flee Across the Border," *Newcastle Sun*, February 7, 1939, p. 5.; "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Stir at Cummeragunja," *Riverine Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Exodus From Cummeragunja," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 7.; "Still Across River," *Shepparton News*, April 6, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Exodus Of Blacks," *Sun*, February 6, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines in Flight," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 6, 1939, p. 11.; "Aborigines Flee From Reserve," *Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 13.; "Aborigines Feared," *Tweed Daily*, February 7, 1939, p. 6. & "Aborigines Uneasy," *West Australian*, February 6, 1939, p. 19.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Exodus From Cummeragunja," *Shepparton News*, February 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 7.

³⁴ "N.S.W. Aborigines want a 'new deal'," *Daily Telegraph*, February 10, 1939, p. 6.

Anderson stated the protesters would receive no rations until they returned.³⁵ However, despite the Board's very public dismissal of the walk-off as a minor incident, the protest was consistently part of the NSW APB monthly meetings.³⁶ There was even a proposal in April for the Board to move the population from Cummeragunja (and Moonahcullah) to a more amalgamated and closed location.³⁷ Although this idea was abandoned, as the APB could not afford it, it is significant that this move was considered and revealed the anxiety the walk-off created.³⁸ The NSW Board was also alone in resolving the situation as the Victorian Government had declared the walk-off as a NSW problem.³⁹

For the six weeks that the protesters remained in Victoria, McQuiggan withheld aid and intimidated them by placing other residents in protester's houses.⁴⁰ During this time the protest camp was visited by two of the highest-ranking members of the APB, the newly appointed full time Superintendent A.W.G. Lipscombe and Vice-Chairman, S.L Anderson who promised an inquiry.⁴¹ After the visit many, especially Cooper and the Elders, believed that they finally had the APB's attention. With that belief, as well as worsening food shortages and the onset of autumn, the protesters returned in good faith.⁴² True to form McQuiggan responded by punishing the protesters through reallocating their houses and manipulating the rations, and after five weeks with no sign of the promised

³⁵ "Aborigines: Expected to Return to Station," *Canberra Times*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.; "Exodus of Aborigines: Must Return to Station or Miss Rations," *Daily Advertiser*, February 8, 1939, p. 4.; "80 Natives Stampede," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 1939, p. 2.; "Return - or No Rations": Ultimatum to Aborigines: Board Supports Manager," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 8, 1939, p. 7. & "Aborigines Flee Across River Murray," *News*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.

³⁶ APB, Minute Books, February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440.; APB, Minute Books, March 8, 1939, Document Number 0444-0447.; APB, Minute Books, April 5, 1939, Document Number 0450-0451.; APB, Minute Books, May 10, 1939, Document Number 0461-0462, 0473.; APB, Minute Books, June 14, 1939, Document Number 0474-0476.; APB, Minute Books, July 12, 1939, Document Number 0478-0480, 0482.; APB, Minute Books, August 9, 1939, Document Number 0483-0486.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 406-407. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254.

³⁷ APB, Minute Books, April 5, 1939, Document Number 0450-0451.

³⁸ APB, Minute Books, October 18, 1939, Document Number 0498-0503.; Goodall, *A History of Aboriginal Communities*, p. 406-407. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254.

³⁹ "Cumerogunga Blacks," *Age*, February 10, 1939, p. 15.; "Aborigines Flee: Inquiry," *Daily Advertiser*, February 7, 1939, p. 7.; "Aborigines' Flight to Victoria Demand Inquiry into Camp Administration: Manager Denies Charges," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, February 7, 1939, p. 7. & "Aborigines Leave Compound: Crossed Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, February 7, 1939, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 405. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253-254.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; APB, Minute Books, February 8, 1939, Document Number 0440.; APB Minute Books, March 8, 1939, Document Number 0444-0447. & APB Minute Books, April 5, 1939, Document Number 0450-0451. However this proposed inquiry did not have any specific demands in it and the protesters were informed no action regarding this proposal would be taken unless they returned to Cummeragunja.

⁴² Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 405-406. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254.

inquiry on April 28th there was a second walk-off in an attempt to force the APB's hand.⁴³

The Second Walk-off

At the start of the second walk-off McQuiggan denied to the press that it had occurred. He downplayed the number of exiles, stating that only one family had left Cummeragunja for business, and denied he had punished those who returned by withholding rations.⁴⁴ The NSW APB's public response to the second walk-off was to deny that it had occurred agreeing with McQuiggan's statement of the residents being happier than ever and that only a couple of families had left.⁴⁵ At the APB's meeting on June 14th it was decided they would endorse McQuiggan's efforts to restore harmony by forming an Advisory Committee, which in the future would direct records of progress of the Station to the Board.⁴⁶ However at this time the conditions at Cummeragunja were worsening, as was McQuiggan's behaviour.⁴⁷ McQuiggan, attempted to confuse the public by reporting that only 19 Aborigines walked off Cummeragunja, and then commenting how beautiful the conditions were on the station for them to return to.⁴⁸ He also played a dangerous game throughout May to July, by lying to the APB in the same way he did to the press concerning the number of residents who had left, the conditions and his management style at Cummeragunja. For example at the July 12th monthly Board meeting the APB received McQuiggan's report describing the progress at Cummeragunja and that only 19 Aborigines from the second walk-off were in Victoria. This was consistent with what McQuiggan told the press, that only 20 'malcontents' left while the rest of population were content.⁴⁹ However, McQuiggan continued to face challenges in

⁴³ *Ibid.*; "News from the Country: Echuca," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32. & "Denies Natives Left Mission," *The Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* & "Just a few lines to let you know.- A Glance Around The News," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6.

⁴⁵ APB, Minute Books, June 14, 1939, Document Number 0474-0476.; APB, Minute Books, July 12, 1939, Document Number 0478-0480, 0482.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 406. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254.

⁴⁶ APB, Minute Books, June 14, 1939, Document Number 0474-0476.

⁴⁷ Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 63.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 122-123. & Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 202-203.

⁴⁸ APB, Minute Books, July 12, 1939, Document Number 0478-0480, 0482. & Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, p. 78.

⁴⁹ APB, Minute Books, July 12, 1939, Document Number 0478-0480, 0482. & "Privations Suffered: Blacks Defiant," *Argus*, July 25, 1939, p. 15. However *The Argus* also published George Patten's statements that there were 44 Aborigines living near Barmah and 25 more Aborigines near Mooroopna. It is likely they were not convinced with what McQuiggan reported about the number of those who left.

the press during the second walk-off. As his voice and denials carried less weight than in February, the focus was more on the protesters. AAL leaders such as Arthur Burdeu and George Patten continued to speak to the press, and the Victorian Government were now providing some aid to the protesters.⁵⁰

During this time the NSW APB looked for allies, but apart from the NSW Government, there were none. Even the Victorian Board believed the protest to be a NSW problem.⁵¹ On July 4th A.G. Pettit, the Chief Inspector⁵² of the Board wrote a letter to the Australian Natives Association in Sydney, which not only provided a useful insight into the Board's view at the time, but was also illustrative of how the APB attempted to deflect the criticism they and the NSW Government were receiving from various different groups in Melbourne. At the start Pettit stated that the protester narrative of the walk-off in February was not in accordance with the facts.⁵³ Not only did the letter reaffirm the old narrative that outside agitators caused the walk-off, but it also misled the ANA regarding the need for aid to be provided to the station and to inform their Victorian branch and other Victorian organisations that aid to the protesters was unwarranted.⁵⁴ What it did reveal was not only the increasing pressure the

⁵⁰ "News from the Country," *Age*, May 6, 1939, p. 32.; "Investigation Promised: Sustenance for Aborigines," *Age*, July 27, 1939, p. 13.; "Aborigines' Complaint," *The Argus*, May 19, 1939, p. 12.; "Privations Suffered: Blacks Defiant," *Argus*, July 25, 1939, p. 15.; "Black Create Problem: Relief Claims," *Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23.; "The Victorian Worker: Conditions of Aborigines," *The Australian Worker*, July 12, 1939, p. 13.; "Aboriginal Camp: Trouble Over Food Supplies," *Daily Advertiser*, May 19, 1939, p. 1.; "Food Dispute: Natives Cross Border," *Daily Examiner*, May 19, 1939, p. 3.; "Aboriginal Station: Natives Leave for Victoria," *Glen Innes Examiner*, April 29, 1939, p. 1.; "Natives Leave Station Again," *Herald*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Denies Natives Left Mission," *Herald*, June 27, 1939, p. 3.; "Blacks Refuse to Go Back: Plight In Camp," *Herald*, July 24, 1939, p. 18.; "Aborigines Seek inquiry By Government: Into Conditions at Station," *The Horsham Times*, May 19, 1939, p. 2.; "Mainland Notes: Plight of Aborigines," *The Mercury*, July 25, 1939, p. 6.; "Aborigines Leave Station: Claim They Are Victimised: Trouble Over Food," *Newcastle Morning Herald*, May 19, 1939, p. 27.; "Natives Again Cross River: Victimised, They Say," *News*, May 18, 1939, p. 10.; "Aborigines Cross Murray River Into Victoria," *Northern Star*, May 19, 1939, p. 14.; "Cummeragunja Rumors Denied," *Riverine Herald*, May 4, 1939, p. 2.; "Aborigines Complain," *Shepparton News*, May 22, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Help For Blacks," *Shepparton News*, July 27, 1939 quoted in *Exodus From Cummeragunja 1938 to 1961*, ed. Lumley and Lumley, p. 8.; "Protest By Aborigines: Better Treatment Demanded," *Singleton Argus*, October, 4, 1939, p. 1.; "Aborigines Leave Station: Families Cross Border to Victoria," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 1939, p. 17. & "Just a few lines to let you know," *Weekly Times*, May 20, 1939, p. 6.

⁵¹ "Crossing the Board: N.S.W. Aborigines," *Argus*, April 29, 1939, p. 2.; "Black Create Problem," *Argus*, July 27, 1939, p. 23. & Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.

⁵² Susan Greer, "Governing Indigenous Peoples: A History of Accounting Interventions in the New South Wales Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards 1883-1969" (Ph.D., thesis, Macquarie University, 2006), p. 240. The role of Inspectors was to provide reports to enable the APB to assess first hand information on how the reserves, stations, homes and camps functioned. Inspectors had to undertake regular reviews of the performance of the said location's managers and prepare a report about each station.

⁵³ SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: A.C. Pettit, Secretary of Aborigines' Protection Board, to Australian Natives Association in Sydney, 4 July 1939, Document Number 1323.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* & John E. Menadue, *A Centenary History of the Australian Natives Association 1871 - 1971* (Melbourne: Honticultural Press, 1971), p. 5. Victoria was the state where the ANA was founded and the ANA did have some influence with State Governments.

Board was under in Melbourne, but also that the APB had no interest or believed there was no justification in establishing an inquiry.⁵⁵

The beginning of the end of McQuiggan

This lack of pressure from the NSW Government on the APB, meant that the Board was able to handle the walk-off largely with a free hand.⁵⁶ It was clear that with the prolonged protest and publicity resulting from the walk-off, on top of an already existing amount of criticism, change was coming. In October the NSW APB managed to end the walk-off by convincing the Victorian Government to withdraw food relief and deny the protesters' children access to the Barmah School, as the Board could provide them with everything they needed at Cummeragunja.⁵⁷ Though the protest was broken the protesters refused to return while McQuiggan remained as manager and many moved to the surrounding areas in NSW and Victoria, remaining bitter and politically stronger after the event.⁵⁸ Their decision to not return was wise after the APB announced on November 1st that no inquiry was needed.⁵⁹ Despite the second walk-off ending, the minutes of APB reveal that political support for McQuiggan was declining.

This started on the 9th August meeting where there were reports that McQuiggan's slow communication and laxity was beginning to frustrate Board members.⁶⁰ At the meeting on October 18th there was a decision taken to send Superintendent Lipscombe to Cummeragunja to get a first hand account of conditions and structure of the administration to determine whether the McQuiggans would be transferred to Menindee.⁶¹ At the next meeting on November 8th because of McQuiggan's lax management the Board stated that if

⁵⁵ Nelson and Nelson, *Dharmalan Dana*, p. 201. & SRNSW: Premier Special Bundles: Pettit, to ANA, 4 July 1939, Document Number 1323. George Nelson and Robynne Nelson stated that Pettit's report was false and misleading because he wanted to cover up what had occurred and probably hoped that the protesters would return before his lies were discovered.

⁵⁶ Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 405. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 253-254.

⁵⁷ "Sustenance To Cease: Aborigines Plight," *Age*, October 12, 1939, p. 12.; Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.; Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities," p. 407. & Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254-255.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Barwick, "Aunty Ellen," p. 191.

⁶⁰ APB, Minute Books, August 9, 1939, Document Number 0483-0486.

⁶¹ APB, Minute Books, October 18, 1939, Document Number 0498-0503.

he did not improve he would be dismissed instead of being transferred.⁶² Even McQuiggan's old ally B.C. Harkness was part of these meetings and did not offer any defences.⁶³ It is likely McQuiggan's dismissal was also due to the walk-off which had brought unprecedented attention in the Australian press, mass support in Melbourne and debate in the NSW and Victorian Parliaments. Apart from McQuiggan's dismissal, this also hastened the reconstruction of the APB as the 'Aborigines Welfare Board' under the new Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1940, ending Aboriginal 'protection' and creating Aboriginal 'assimilation'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The quote at the start of this chapter symbolised McQuiggan's and the APB's attitude towards the protesters and the mistreatment of the residents at Cummeragunja. These denials masked an organisation in decline following years of controversy, with the walk-off becoming the final nail in the coffin of the old APB. Throughout the 1930s the Board's power was increasingly under strain following funding cuts as well as public criticism from Aboriginals and their white allies. Having survived two inquiries and some protection from the NSW Government, there was discussion for it to be reformed. Indeed, by the time of the walk-off the Board was facing significant isolation. However, during the walk-off the Board and its manager McQuiggan refused to change. For example the APB recycled its tactics against Maynard and used them against Jack Patten, which failed to resolve the walk-off as Patten did not represent or embody the protest. McQuiggan and the Board's lies to the general public in the press about the reasons behind the protest and McQuiggan's own worsening treatment of the residents helped to prolong and further politicise the protesters. What the Board had not expected was the mass support from Melbourne for the protesters and the use of the press by the Aboriginal activists and white allies. Although there

⁶² APB, Minute Books, November 8, 1939, Document Number 0505-0507.

⁶³ APB, Minute Books, August 9, 1939, Document Number 0483-0486.; APB, Minute Books, October 18, 1939, Document Number 0498-0503.; APB, Minute Books, November 8, 1939, Document Number 0505-0507.; APB, Minute Books, December 20, 1939, Document Number 0511-0517.; APB Minute Books, January 17, 1940, Document Number 0521-0523.; APB Minute Books, February 12, 1940, Document Number 0527-0530. & APB Minute Books, March 13, 1940, Document Number 0534-0536.

⁶⁴ Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 63.

was no wide public victory for the protesters, their significant action and the event itself ultimately resulted in the sacking of McQuiggan. It also resulted in reform of the board and the legislation. Significantly, in 1943, the newly constituted Aborigines' Welfare Board, as the old Board was now called, allocated one position on the board to an Aboriginal, William Ferguson, who held this position until his death in 1950.⁶⁵ This had been a signature demand of the protesters all along.

The quietness in which these changes occurred obscured an important historical fact: Aboriginal people had created conditions for changes in their lives and the bureaucracy was forced to make concessions as a result. This moment is an important part of a history of civil and human rights in Australia, not widely celebrated much less understood.

⁶⁵ Newbury, *Aboriginal Heroes of the Resistance*, p. 29.

CONCLUSION

The Cummeragunja walk-off was a milestone in the history of Aboriginal political protest in Australia. While deep and ongoing significance to the Aboriginal community in the south-east, it is not widely known about or celebrated in Australian society today. Yet, this was not the case at the time. This thesis has shown that, in the context of interwar Australia, the walk-off created quite a stir. The walk-off not only lasted for several months and saw many of the Aboriginal protesters never return to the station, it was at the centre of a wide ark of publicity and it became the site of widespread non-Aboriginal angst and concern on the eve of the Second World War. The walk-off also brought together black and white but it caused cross-social and cultural alliances as numerous concerned citizens, from different backgrounds, came to the defence of the protesters and their demands. The protest forced a very reluctant and calcified administration to act. While its response was not immediate and did not amount to a capitulation, the bureaucracy was forced to remove the key opponent of Aboriginal people's freedom and well-being, and reform. In a sense, the Aboriginal protesters also won in that they ultimately got their freedom from Board control, by establishing exile communities of their own.

This thesis has argued that the Cummeragunja walk-off was a particular kind of protest at a particular point in time. By the 1930s Aboriginal protest was not new. Ever since the dark days of frontier wars, Aboriginal people had found ways to regroup and recover, sometimes finding refuge on reserves and stations close to traditional country. This was the case for the community at Cummeragunja who, with the help of missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews and teacher, Thomas Shadrach James, founded 'Maloga' on the NSW side of the Murray River in the late nineteenth century. With food and education the community survived and prospered. The pressures of settler colonialism inevitably shaped Aboriginal politics into the twentieth century. As the state gradually intruded in their lives and took control of the management of the station the community was relocated. Calling their new home Cummeragunja they continued to assert ownership of their lives and identities along the river.

Yet, their freedom and economies shrunk. A combination of war, depression, politics and an over-bearing bureaucratic apparatus meant that the capacity of the residents to live healthy lives in their own communities became increasingly difficult. At the same time, the pressure of closer white settlement meant that their cherished land, their industries, even their own families were increasingly under threat. As their lives deteriorated under Protection Board control, the residents consistently aired their grievances, utilising methods such as deputising and petitioning politicians, letter-writing and forming sympathetic white alliances. As much as the walk-off was a brilliant strategy, it was also a desperate one, but one which the protesters thought would get the attention of the politicians. While the border between NSW and Victoria was not something which the Aboriginal community recognised, they knew that it mattered to the white politicians, whose creation of it in the nineteenth century had already resulted in divisions in their communities. Yet, to the Aboriginal communities, the river was no barrier. Indeed, when desperate measures were needed to demonstrate their plight, crossing it, to camp on its other side, seemed logical.

Furthermore, by the late 1930s they were not alone. This was not just a particular kind of protest, it happened at a particular point in time. Aboriginal political protest was changing. The fact was that the older methods of Aboriginal resistance were less and less likely to gain traction and a younger generation of Aboriginal activists, exposed to the wider world of activism and advocacy of the disenfranchised around the depression and war years, increasingly took the reins. They formed political associations and they utilised the press. They frequently spoke out in the public domain and they used the press to publicise their cause. As I have shown in this thesis, all of the key activists involved in articulating the cause of the community and keeping it alive were deeply connected to Cummeragunja themselves and, the lack of this connection in NSW, helps to explain the differences in response between the two states. Place was thus a key marker of how this event played out. While the state could pinpoint one individual as the ring-leader, the fact was that it was a group effort by people whose identities, histories and communities were bound up in the station.

It was also during the interwar years, the Aboriginal community could count on an expanding support network of non-Aboriginal citizens. In these years, much like the Indigenous protesters themselves, there was a growing number of humanitarian groups and individuals who, dissatisfied with the social and political status of Aboriginal Australians, began to act. White lobby groups were formed and created alliances with Aboriginal activists, particularly in urban environments like Fitzroy in Melbourne where a younger generation of Aboriginal people lived and lobbied. These diverse alliances were very important to the longevity of the walk-off and, ultimately, its outcome. At the same time, as if to mirror this wider circle of white concern the Australian press was more sympathetic and receptive to Aboriginal issues than at any time previously. When the walk-off occurred there was support and sympathy for their plight.

In the end the residents at Cummeragunja did not get what they were looking for: the immediate removal of McQuiggan, an inquiry into the management of the station and improvements to recapture some of its former glory. However, this was a remarkable historic moment. Never before had a group of Aboriginal people protested in this way and managed to prolong it against the odds. As this thesis shows, ultimately they did force the government's hands. McQuiggan was sacked and the Board was reformed the following year. This was done quietly – the government did not want to be seen to be conceding to Aboriginal demands. These gestures were ultimately acts of containment and most involved in the protest viewed it as a failure. Yet, we should understand the government response for what it was. There is no doubt that had the protest not happened, had the protesters not held out, had they not marshalled the support, had they not had the media coverage and the help of white supporters, little would have changed. The Government was not prepared for a prolonged Aboriginal protest much less the amount of support and press attention it created.

Thus, the walk-off was a particular kind of protest at a particular point in time. It signaled the beginning of a new era of Aboriginal politicking and claim making. The people ultimately won what they wanted: their freedom. They also turned

the minds of many settler Australians to their plight. The protest was the first 'mass' *political* protest of its kind and it marked a turning point in cross-cultural political alliance which continued to be a feature of Aboriginal resistance into the twentieth century.

EPILOGUE

Despite the feelings of failure at the time, the history around the Cummeragunja walk-off has created a positive legacy in Aboriginal memory and protest, which was even evident at the time. It was clearly seen as a landmark move for, in November 1940, largely off the back of the walk-off, 80 Wangkumara people left Brewarrina Station to return to their traditional lands.¹ More locally, for the Yorta Yorta community, the protest holds an important place in their identity and history in the struggle for Aboriginal rights and as a sign of resistance in defying the Board.² The walk-off also meant for many the creation of a new life for themselves, their children and grandchildren in Victorian towns and at their organised town on 'the Flat'.³ On a wider scale the protest influenced many of those involved to join in the wider campaign for the Aboriginals in NSW and Victoria.⁴ For example throughout their lives Margaret Tucker and Geraldine Briggs campaigned for Aboriginal and women's rights, until their deaths in 1996 and 2005.⁵ Doug Nicholls also continued to fight for Aboriginal rights within

¹ Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909 – 1939" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Sydney, 1982), p. 408-409. & Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 257-258. Goodall's stated that this long trek by the Wangkumara was a sign of further Aboriginal resistance to come.

² Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 53. & Lois Peeler, *RiverConnect: Aboriginal Oral History: The Cultural Landscape of the 'Flat' Shepparton Mooroopna* (Shepparton: Greater Shepparton City Council, 2008), p. 9, 38.

³ "Alfred 'Boydie' Turner (born 1928)," Victorian State Government: Department of Premier and Cabinet, available from <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/projects-and-programs/leadership/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll-2014-inductees/alfred-boydie-turner-born-1928>; Wayne Atkinson, "Ngariarty: Speaking Strong; 6 The Schools of Human Experience," in *First Australians: an illustrated history*, ed. Rachel Perkins, Marcia Langton, Wayne Atkinson, James Boyce, R.G. Kimber, Steve Kinnane, Noel Loos and Bruce Pascoe (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2010), p. 210.; Wayne Atkinson quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 182.; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 264.; Fay Carter quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 180.; Fiona Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station: Redrawing Boundaries* (Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 117-125.; Fiona Davis, "Colouring within the lines: settler colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888-1960s" (Ph.D., thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 48, 197, 205.; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, p. 254-255.; Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 13.; Alec Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (Ronin Films, 1983), 44-46 minute mark.; George Nelson and Robynne Nelson, *Dharmalan Dana: An Australian Aboriginal man's 73-year search for the story of his Aboriginal and Indian ancestors* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), p. 202.; Bevan Nicholls quoted in Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 106.; Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 11-12. & Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Rosalie Simkin and Lyn Loger, *Double ID: Life Story of Hilton Hamilton Walsh, Born 11th June, 1923 Died 5th December, 1997; Written, using his own words and diction, by Rosalie Simkin & Lyn Loger* (Shepparton: Prominent Press, 2001), p. 42. Fay Carter who had lived on Cummeragunja until the age of four recalled how living on 'the Flat' created a sense of freedom and community. Wayne Atkinson who was a part of a new generation as he was born outside of Cummeragunja on 'the Flat', described the unity created by living there as a Cummeragunja exile community.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Alick Jackomos (1924-1999)," Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 1957-1973, available from http://indigenoustrights.net.au/people/pagination/alick_jackomos; "Geraldine Briggs AO (1910 - 2005): A tireless campaigner for human rights," Victorian State Government: Department of Premier and Cabinet, available from <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/projects-and-programs/leadership/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll-2011-inductees/geraldine-briggs-ao-1910-2005>; A. Jackomos, "Marge

white society and was awarded a number of great honours including a knighthood and becoming Governor of South Australia.⁶

Furthermore, the special connection to Cummeragunja explored in this thesis, particularly of former residents remained even in death. In 1981 after his passing Doug Nicholls was buried at Cummeragunja cemetery alongside William Cooper, Thomas Shadrach James, and in later years Margaret Tucker.⁷ Connection to Cummeragunja is also applied to the walk-off itself in terms of how it is remembered. Jack Patten is now memorialised as the one who started the protest.⁸ The walk-off, and these Cummeragunja residents, had also influenced white allies who helped Aboriginals for the rest of their lives. Arthur Burdeu passed away in August 1942, yet the other figures continued to help Aboriginals.⁹ Alick Jackomos married former Cummeragunja resident Merle Morgan in March 1951.¹⁰ For decades the two campaigned for Aboriginal rights, sadly Alick died in 1999.¹¹ Alick's legacy and enthusiasm for Aboriginal people and events all began with his experience in the 1930s, particularly the walk off.¹² Similarly, until her death in 1970, Helen Baillie focused large amounts of her life

Tucker, M.B.E., "Koorier 3, December, 1989, p. 15. & "Tucker, Margaret Elizabeth (Auntie Marge) (1904–1996)," Indigenous Australia, available from <http://ja.anu.edu.au/biography/tucker-margaret-elizabeth-auntie-marge-1556>
⁶ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 213.; Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 53.; Richard Broome, 'Nicholls, Sir Douglas Ralph (Doug) (1906–1988)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 18, (MUP, 2012), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920> & Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls Aboriginal Leader* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1972), p. 6. Among the number of honours Nicholls received were his MBE (1957), OBE (1968) and his knighthood on 3 June 1972 at the age of 66. On 1st December 1976 Sir Douglas was appointed Governor of South Australia and hosted Queen Elizabeth during her royal tour in March. On 30th April 1977 Nicholls relinquished his governorship following a stroke.

⁷ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 192-193.; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. 4, 24.; Broome, 'Nicholls', *ADB*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholls-sir-douglas-ralph-doug-14920>; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 110.; Alfred Turner quoted in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), p. v-vi. & Walsh, Simkin and Loger, *Double ID*, p. 20.

⁸ Atkinson, "Ngariarty," p. 206-207.; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 113-114.; Banjo Clarke and Camilla Chance, *Wisdom Man, Banjo Clarke as told to Camilla Chance: The compassionate life and beliefs of a remarkable Aboriginal Elder* (Camberwell: Viking an imprint of Penguin Books, 2003), p. 99.; Theresa Clements, *From Old Maloga: The memoirs of an aboriginal woman* (Pahran: Fraser & Morphet, 1940s), p. 7-8.; Emmanuel Cooper quoted in Stuart Rintoul, *The Wailing: A National Black Oral History* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books Australia, 1993), p. 268.; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 129-130.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 210-211.; Jack Horner, 'Patten, John Thomas (Jack) (1905–1957)', *ADB*, 11, (MUP, 1988), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/patten-john-thomas-jack-7980>; Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Book Company, 1974), p. 76-79.; Morgan, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, 42-43 minutes mark.; Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunja and its Aboriginal People* (Fitzroy: Fotoscreen Process Printers, 1952), p. 16.; Peeler, *RiverConnect*, p. 10.; Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker M.B.E.* (Sydney: URE, 1977), p. 168. & Walsh, Simkin and Loger, *Double ID*, p. 42. It is only in earlier works such as those of Clements's and Morgan's that Patten is not proclaimed as the driving force behind the walk-off. After that the rest of the autobiographies and biographies focus on the importance of Jack Patten's visit to Cummeragunja giving people the courage to leave.

⁹ Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 110.

¹⁰ "Alick Jackomos," Collaborating, available from http://indigenousrights.net.au/people/pagination/alick_jackomos; Richard Broome and Corinne Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), p. 23, 64, 70-71. & "Alick Jackomos Retires," *Koorier 3*, May, 1989, p. 16-17.

¹¹ "Alick Jackomos," Collaborating, available from http://indigenousrights.net.au/people/pagination/alick_jackomos; Broome and Manning, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 94, 185, 256-259. & "Alick Jackomos Retires," *Koorier 3*, May, 1989, p. 16-17.

¹² Broome and Manning, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 185.

to Aboriginal causes, a legacy which remains largely forgotten.¹³ As for the station today, the Aboriginal people now own Cummeragunja, and the walk-off has been commemorated in a number of different ways in documentaries, dedications, reenactments, an opera and in cultural memory.¹⁴

¹³ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, p. 295-297.; Clarke and Chance, *Wisdom Man*, p. 127-128. & Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, "One Woman's Concerns for Social Justice: the Letters of Helen Baillie to Farnham Maynard 1933-36," in *Anglo-Catholicism in Melbourne: Papers to Mark the 150th Anniversary of St Peter's Eastern Hill 1846-1996*, ed. Colin Holden (Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1997), p. 95.

¹⁴ S. Fletcher, 'On a mission,' *ABC: Central Victoria*, February 5, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2009/02/05/2482722.htm>; Davis, *Australian Settler Colonialism*, p. 127.; Davis, "Colouring within the lines," p. 207-208.; Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 13. & "Cummeragunja Walk On," *Koorier* 3, May, 1939, p. 14. Decades on the walk-off was featured as part of the celebration of the struggle and survival for Koori rights, for example the Cummeragunja Walk On a four day dedication of the fight for rights from November 24th-28th, 1988. The walk-off has featured in two documentaries, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1982), and episode six of *First Australians* (2008). On February 4th 2009, the walk-off was reenacted by Aboriginal people who started at Cummeragunja and ended more than 80 kilometres away at the Flats at Mooroopna after 16 hours, and reported by the ABC. In 2010, an opera called *Pecan Summer* was also based on the walk-off.

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