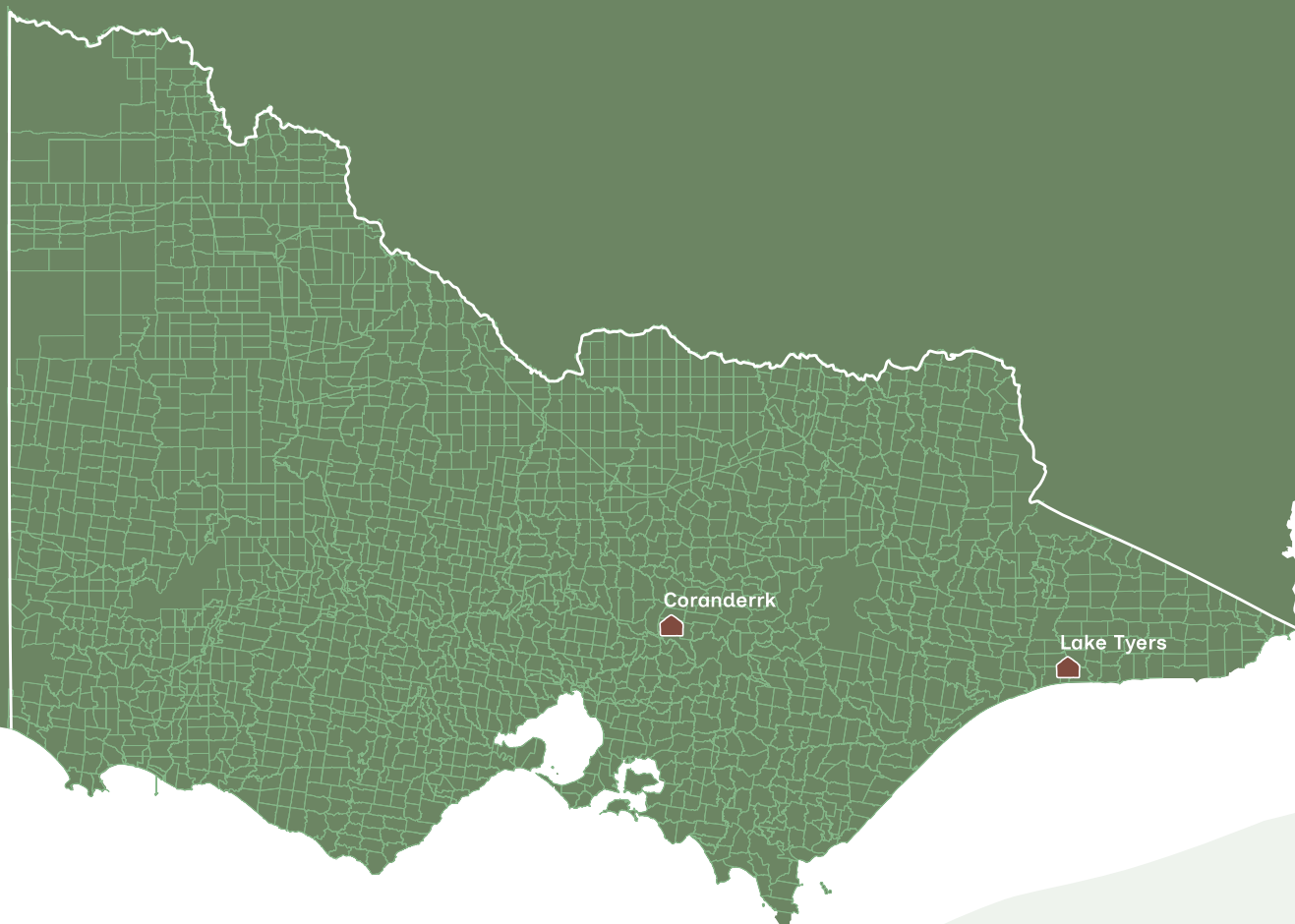




STATE OF VICTORIA WITH ALL LAND TAKEN BY THE CROWN

-  Victoria
-  Land mapped and taken by the Crown
-  Missions and reserves

Vicmap, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Esri, USGS

For many Aboriginal people, capitalism and colonialism were one and the same—a system that had stolen their land, exploited their labour, and kept them in poverty while enriching those who had taken everything from them. The communists spoke of class struggle, but for Aboriginal people, it was about more than class. It was about survival; about land; about breaking the chains of oppression that had bound them since invasion.

Auntie Margaret Tucker, a proud Yorta Yorta woman and lifelong activist, saw the brutal conditions Aboriginal workers endured—low wages, forced labour, no legal protections. She had lived through the degradation of domestic servitude and the crushing weight of policies engineered to expunge her people. The Communist Party, unlike the major political parties of the time, did not look away. It was willing to publicly denounce these injustices and work alongside Aboriginal people to fight them.

She was not alone. In New South Wales, Jack Patten, whose voice rang through the streets of Sydney in the lead-up to the 1938 Day of Mourning, found allies among the radicals of the left, the men and women who were unafraid to name Australia for what it was: a settler state built on theft and brutality. William Ferguson, the Wiradjuri man who built the Aborigines Progressive Association from the ground up, knew that the trade unions, many with deep ties to the CPA, were among the few institutions prepared to hear him.

It was a time of organising across the country and beyond the cities, the struggle played out on the red dirt of the north. In Western Australia Don McLeod, a white man who had aligned himself with the resistance of the Pilbara, worked alongside Aboriginal stockmen and station workers, urging them to demand fair wages and control over their own lives.

Back in Victoria, Pastor Doug Nicholls, ever the diplomat, worked carefully, weaving between movements, refusing to be bound by party lines. He did not join the communists, but he stood in rooms where their voices carried; worked beside those whose radicalism pushed the boundaries of possibility.

The CPA was far from perfect. It was still a party shaped by white men, many of whom failed to fully grasp the depth of Aboriginal sovereignty and culture. But for all its flaws, it was one of the few political movements that saw Aboriginal people not as a problem to be assimilated, but as comrades in a shared fight against exploitation and state violence.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as governments worked tirelessly to silence Aboriginal voices, the Communist Party helped to amplify them. Communist-aligned newspapers printed exposés on the conditions in missions and reserves, documenting past massacres, stolen wages, and the enforced starvation of Aboriginal communities. They ran stories on the theft of children, the brutality of station owners, the hypocrisy of a government that claimed to protect while legislating control.

But the Australian state was watching. By the 1950s, as the Cold War advanced and anti-communist hysteria swept through the country, Aboriginal activists who had worked alongside the CPA found themselves under surveillance. It was not just their politics that marked them as threats, but their very existence as Black people demanding justice.

THE GOVERNMENT FEARED ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE, AND IT FEARED COMMUNISM. TOGETHER, THEY WERE SEEN AS A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO WHITE POWER.

Despite the political repression, the radical alliances formed during this period laid the foundations for the self-determination movements that would rise in the 1960s and '70s. The CPA's involvement in Aboriginal rights eventually faded, but it had helped to rekindle the fight. First Peoples' struggle for justice had begun long before the communists arrived, and it would continue long after they were gone.

Meanwhile, a right-wing paramilitary group called the New Guard sought to suppress leftist movements and uphold the racial and social order of the time.

The Labor movement itself was fractured, with figures like Jack Lang pushing for radical economic reforms, while mainstream unions navigated their own allegiances between socialism, nationalism and the status quo. For many Aboriginal people, excluded from citizenship and the political system entirely, the appeal of communism lay in its promise of equality—an alternative to a state that continued to treat them as less than human.

As another war loomed, Australian nationalism took on a new sense of urgency. The government of Joseph Lyons, leader of the United Australia

Party, was torn between loyalty to Britain and the need to strengthen Australia's own military defences. The Australian Natives' Association, once a leading advocate for national self-reliance, had little influence in these decisions. Its vision of an independent Australia had been supplanted by the realities of global conflict.

World War II presented both an opportunity and a cruel paradox for Aboriginal people. As in World War I, many enlisted, believing that wearing the uniform might finally earn them the respect and recognition long denied at home. World War II would change plenty—but not the place Aboriginal people held in their own country.

They fought alongside white soldiers as they had two decades earlier. But when the guns fell silent, the old barriers reappeared. The same racist policies remained, the same denial of land, wages, and the most basic rights of citizenship. They had stood on battlefields fighting for a nation that refused to fight for them. Homecoming only deepened the injustice.

The political environment of the 1930s had made one thing clear: Australian nationalism, as it was defined at the time, had no place for Aboriginal people.

The Australian Aborigines' League did not stand alone. The movement found its early footing with the help of a small but committed group of white allies—people who, despite the privilege of being untouched by Aboriginal suffering, worked with the league to try and fill the silent void.

White ministers, unionists and progressive intellectuals played key roles in the League's early campaigns. William Cooper was clear that Aboriginal voices must lead, but he also understood the brutal reality of Australian politics: Aboriginal people alone could not make the government listen. It was the presence of

white allies that forced politicians to take notice; that pried open doors long since slammed shut.

One of the earliest and most steadfast—if complicated—supporters of Aboriginal people was Reverend Ernest Gribble, a missionary whose career straddled both advocacy and paternalism. Gribble, shaped by the colonial paradigms of his era, believed in the ‘civilising’ mission of Christianity, but he also broke ranks with many of his peers by publicly condemning the brutal treatment of Aboriginal people. His most significant intervention came in the aftermath of the Forrest River massacre in Western Australia in 1926.

From his position as superintendent of the Forrest River Mission, Gribble helped bring the massacre to light, reporting the killings of Aboriginal people by police and settlers to authorities. These reports triggered a Royal Commission into the massacre—one of the few official investigations into frontier violence in Australia’s history.

Though deeply paternalistic in his approach, Gribble’s willingness to confront the violence inflicted upon Aboriginal people forced white Australia to reckon, however briefly, with the bloodshed carried out in its name. His legacy, like that of many historical figures, is complex—a reminder that the path to truth-telling has often been fraught with contradiction.

Another figure was Mary Bennett, an educator and activist who tirelessly campaigned against the forced removal of Aboriginal children. She worked alongside the League, using her writing and advocacy to demand land rights, citizenship, and equal wages for Aboriginal people. Her words carried into spaces from which Aboriginal voices were barred, challenging the myth that the colonial violence was a historical relic.

Trade unionists, particularly from the Melbourne Trades Hall, also lent their weight

to the movement, recognising the fight for Aboriginal rights as inseparable from the broader struggle of Australian workers. They helped to organise protests, print leaflets, and pressure politicians, offering the Australian Aborigines’ League access to union networks that could amplify its demands.

These white allies did not lead the movement. They did not dictate its demands, nor attempt to soften its anger. But their support gave the Australian Aborigines’ League something it desperately needed: a way to cut through government indifference. The League knew that white sympathy could not be mistaken for true justice; that real power could never come from borrowed voices. But in those early years, when Aboriginal demands were still met with deafening silence, it was the echoes of white dissent that bore their words into a broader arena—a place where they had never been welcome. The presence of white Australians in the movement forced the nation to confront what it had long tried to ignore.

The fight for Aboriginal rights moved forwards not because of white generosity, but because of Aboriginal determination—and it was supported by those who knew the price of their privilege and chose to use it in service of the truth.

For too long, Aboriginal affairs had been the remit of white politicians and *protectors* who neither understood nor cared about the true needs of the people they governed.

THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES’ LEAGUE SOUGHT TO CHANGE THAT.

FIRST PEOPLES' VOICES NEEDED AMPLIFICATION IN ORDER TO BE HEARD—AND SO THE LEAGUE SET ABOUT BUILDING ITS PLATFORM.



In 1933, Cooper had begun drafting a petition to King George V, seeking direct intervention in the plight of Aboriginal Australians. This petition did not beg for charity; it demanded justice. It called for Aboriginal representation in Parliament, for policies that would protect and uplift rather than oppress, and for the British Crown to acknowledge the urgent need for reform.

With the patience of a man who had spent decades fighting uphill battles, Cooper and the League set about gathering signatures. They walked the country, speaking with Aboriginal communities from Victoria to Western Australia, travelling by train, horse-drawn cart and foot—whatever means would take them to the people who had been written out of history, but were determined to be heard.

It was no easy task. Many of those approached had never been asked for their opinion on anything, let alone for their signatures on a document addressed to the King himself. Some were wary: what good had ever come from a piece of paper handed to a white man? Others were fearful, as signing their names, even with an 'X', meant drawing attention to themselves—and for many, attention from the authorities was a dangerous prospect.

The League members, exhausted but relentless, crisscrossed the continent. They stood before communities gathered under trees, by riverbanks, on mission verandas and in station yards, explaining what this petition could mean. They convinced people—many of whom had been denied literacy, who had been forced to live at the mercy of station managers and mission authorities—that their signatures were not just marks on a page, but weapons in the struggle for rights.

At each stop, they gathered names. Not the names of the powerful, nor those printed in law books or history texts, but of those who had endured. Names of men and women who had seen their lands taken, their children stolen, their freedoms stripped away. Many could not read or write: government policies had ensured that education for Aboriginal people was minimal, if it was provided at all. But the League remained undeterred. Cooper and his colleagues explained the petition in careful, patient words. And when people understood, they made their mark—signatures that carried the weight of generations of struggle.

The League gathered names from men who had to hide their wages from the government agents who controlled their every move. From women who had seen their children taken by authorities claiming to act in their best interests. From Elders who remembered when the land had not been carved up by fences and deeds, and still grieved the generations lost to disease, bullets and hunger.

More than 1,800 Aboriginal people from nations all over the continent signed the petition—an extraordinary feat given the barriers of distance, illiteracy and the everyday fight for survival.

The petition was ambitious in its simplicity. It called on King George V, the head of the British

Empire, to intervene on behalf of Aboriginal Australians; to grant them representation in the Australian Parliament; and to ensure that their rights were recognised under the law.

It was a bold act of resistance, led by an Elder who had spent a lifetime watching governments pass policies engineered to wipe out his people.

In Victoria, members of the Australian Aborigines' League visited places where Aboriginal families had been forcibly relocated and where protectionist policies dictated every aspect of daily life. They spoke to people at Cummeragunja Reserve, a place already brimming with political consciousness and resistance, where men and women who had suffered under government policies understood the urgent need for representation.

From Framlingham to Lake Tyers, from Echuca to Shepparton, the League carried the petition like a sacred object, its pages filling with the names of those who believed that if Britain still held authority over this land, then the King himself should be made to hear their voices.



FIRST PEOPLES KNEW THE SYSTEM WOULD NOT MAKE IT EASY.

Government officials, station managers, and mission authorities often saw William Cooper's efforts as subversive. In some places, the League was refused entry; in others, people were warned not to sign. The state-controlled Board for the Protection of Aborigines had spent years fostering dependency, discouraging political thought, and ensuring that Aboriginal

people remained subject to its control. A petition demanding parliamentary representation was a direct challenge to that authority.

In the end, the petition simply read:

PETITION.

of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Australia to His Majesty, King

George V, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, Ireland, and British

Dominions beyond the seas, King; Defender of the Faith; Emperor of India.

TO THE KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY, IN COUNCIL

THE HUMBLE PETITION of the undersigned Aboriginal inhabitants of

the Continent of Australia respectfully sheweth:—

THAT WHEREAS it was not only a moral duty, but a strict injunction,

included in the commission issued to those who came to people Australia,

that the original inhabitants and their heirs and successors should be adequately cared for;

AND WHEREAS the terms of the commission have not been adhered

to in that —

(a) Our lands have been expropriated by Your Majesty's Governments, and

(b) Legal status is denied to us by Your Majesty's Governments;

AND WHEREAS all petitions made on our behalf to Your Majesty's

Governments have failed.

YOUR PETITIONERS humbly pray that Your Majesty will intervene on our behalf, and, through the instrument of Your Majesty's

Governments in the Commonwealth of Australia—will prevent the extinction of the Aboriginal race and give better conditions for all, granting us the power to propose a member of parliament, of our own blood or a white man known to have studied our needs and to be in sympathy with our race, to represent us in the Federal Parliament.

AND YOUR PETITIONERS will ever pray.

After penning the letter in 1933, Cooper had spent the following four years travelling and collecting signatures. King George V died in 1936; succeeded briefly by King Edward VIII before King George VI ascended to the throne. When the petition was finally submitted to the Commonwealth Government in 1937, it was met with silence. In March of the following year, the Australian Government elected not to send the petition to King George VI: a Cabinet paper coldly recommended that ‘no action be taken’, as though the voices of 1,800 people carried no weight. The government’s refusal to act was a deliberate, calculated erasure of Aboriginal agency.



The Australian Aborigines’ League was part of a growing web of Aboriginal activism that extended across the continent.

Aunty Margaret Tucker was a force within the League, bringing attention to the specific struggles faced by Aboriginal women. Bill Onus, who would later become a towering figure in Aboriginal cultural and political advocacy, was among those shaping the League’s strategies.

By 1938, the Australian Aborigines’ League had joined forces with the Aborigines Progressive Association in New South Wales to organise the first nationwide protest of the anniversary of British invasion.



On 26 January 1938, as white Australia celebrated the 150th anniversary of British colonisation with parades and pageantry, a different kind of gathering took place a few streets away. At Australian Hall in Sydney, a group of Aboriginal leaders and activists had assembled for what would become a landmark moment in the struggle for Indigenous rights: the Day of Mourning.

The irony of the setting wasn’t lost on those gathered. In fact, the choice of venue was a statement: a place where Aboriginal people were usually allowed entry only to clear tables, never to take the floor. But that day, it was theirs.

Around a hundred people had travelled from across the country, from missions and reserves, from city fringes and country towns, arriving in their best suits and dresses. It was an assertion of dignity in the face of a system that treated them as less than citizens. They had come not to ask, but to demand.

The meeting began late, held up by the Sesquicentenary Parade winding through the streets outside. The contrast was stark. On one side of the city, white Australia cheered its own progress, blind to any suffering it had inflicted. On the other, Aboriginal leaders gathered in defiance of the lie that they were a fading people.

At 1.30 pm, Jack Patten called the meeting to order. A gifted orator and tireless activist, Patten was a leading voice in Aboriginal resistance, known for his sharp intellect and unwavering commitment to justice. As president of the Aborigines Progressive Association, he had spent years campaigning against government policies that kept his people impoverished and powerless. Now, standing before the

crowd in Australian Hall, he spoke with the clarity and conviction that had made him a formidable leader.

‘On this day, the white people rejoice,’ he began. ‘But we, as Aborigines, have no reason to rejoice on Australia’s 150th birthday.’

This was not just a protest against past injustices; it was a fight against the ongoing reality of exclusion, poverty, and state control. Those present had seen their families removed to reserves, their children taken, their wages stolen, and their lives regulated by laws that did not apply to the people who celebrated in the streets outside.

Seated in the hall were some of the most dedicated figures in the Aboriginal rights movement, including members of the Australian Aborigines’ League, the Melbourne-based organisation that had been relentlessly petitioning governments for change. William Cooper, now in his seventies, sat beside Pastor Doug Nicholls and Aunt Margaret Tucker, whose own experience of forced removal had rendered her a fierce advocate for mothers and children.

They had come from different places—missions, reserves, urban communities—but they were united by the same determination: to force the nation to reckon with its treatment of Aboriginal people, and to demand the rights that had been denied for too long.

The Australian Aborigines’ League had spent years petitioning for change. Letters had been written, delegations sent, appeals made to the so-called conscience of the nation. The government had ignored them and waited for their authors to disappear. But they had not disappeared. And they would not be ignored any longer.

Pastor Doug Nicholls, representing the Australian Aborigines’ League, declared: ‘On behalf of Victorian Aborigines I want to say that

we support this resolution in every way. The public does not realise what our people have suffered for 150 years. Aboriginal girls have been sent to Aboriginal reserves and have not been given any opportunity to improve themselves. Their treatment has been disgusting. The white people have done nothing for us whatever. Put on reserves, with no proper education, how can Aborigines take their place as equals with whites? Now is our chance to have things altered.’

Their demands were clear: full citizenship rights. The right to vote. The right to education. The right to equal wages. The right to live free from government-appointed *protectors* who decided where they could work, where they could live, and whether they could keep their own children.

As resolutions were passed, the weight of history hung heavy in the room. This was not the first time Aboriginal people had fought back. From the first moments of invasion, from the frontier massacres, from the advent of the missions and reserves, resistance had never stopped. The Day of Mourning was not a beginning. It was a continuation.

Outside, the parades marched on, oblivious. Inside, the words spoken would echo long after the ticker tape and confetti washed into the Gadigal Peoples’ harbour.

The movement was growing. The fight would not end here, and history would remember.



Later that same year, a small group of Aboriginal men and women walked with quiet purpose towards Collins Street in the centre of Melbourne. Few around them paid attention, and nobody could have guessed the enormity of what they were about to do.

IT WAS AN ACT WITHOUT
PRECEDENT: A PEOPLE PERSECUTED
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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD.

It was a warm December day. The city was bustling with Christmas shoppers and businessmen in crisp suits, the hum of trams rattling down Bourke Street.

At the head of the group was the Australian Aborigines' League, carrying a letter addressed to the German Consulate. In it, they condemned the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people, denouncing the horrors of Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass—when Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues across Germany had been smashed and burned; their people beaten, murdered, or dragged away to fates unknown.

It was an act without precedent: a people persecuted on their own land, who long before had been declared a dying race, stripped of their children, their wages, their freedoms, standing in defence of another oppressed people on the other side of the world.

There has been much speculation about whether William Cooper himself was physically present at the Consulate that day. Some accounts place him there, while others suggest that, due to his advancing years, he entrusted the task to younger League members. But the truth of his presence is secondary to the enormity of his vision. The protest had been born from his leadership; his unwavering belief that justice was not divisible: that to demand dignity for Aboriginal people was to demand dignity for all.

The German Consulate refused to receive the group or their letter. Officials would not permit these Aboriginal men and women to voice their protest against the Nazi regime that was committing crimes so vast that history itself would recoil at them. But it didn't matter.

The power of their action was not in whether the Consulate accepted the letter. It was in the fact that the League had written it at all.

By standing up for Jewish people in Europe, they forced Australia to confront its own hypocrisy. How could a country that prided itself on justice condemn the treatment of Jews in Germany while continuing to legislate the oppression of Aboriginal people at home? How could it call Hitler's policies *abhorrent* while enforcing its own policies of exclusion, control and racial hierarchy?

The event was largely ignored by newspapers and the government alike. And yet, decades later, this act would be remembered as one of the most remarkable statements of moral courage in Australian history. It was an assertion that Aboriginal people were not just victims of injustice, but fighters against it. They may have been denied their rights on their own land, but they would not be silent in the face of oppression elsewhere.

It was not the last time Aboriginal people would stand in solidarity with others; nor would it be the last time they used international struggles to shine a light on their own. Although the Consulate had closed its doors to them, history has never forgotten the day the most marginalised people in Australia marched through the streets of Melbourne—not for themselves alone, but for justice everywhere.



For all their efforts over the years, the Australian Aborigines' League and its leaders were met with sustained indifference from the Australian government. Its advocacy was seen as an irritation rather than a legitimate political movement.

Government policies remained mired in paternalism. Aboriginal people were still under the control of protection boards, denied full citizenship, and subjected to policies designed to

break up families and cultures. When they asked for justice, they were told to be patient. When they asked for representation, they were told they were not ready.

But Cooper, Tucker, Onus and their allies knew better. They knew that waiting meant extinction.



IN THE CRUCIBLE OF WORLD WAR II, A GLOBAL STRUGGLE AGAINST TYRANNY, ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS FROM VICTORIA ENLISTED TO DEFEND A NATION THAT HAD LONG MARGINALISED THEM.

Their service is a testament to resilience and patriotism, even in the face of systemic discrimination.

One of the most distinguished among them was Reginald (Reg) Walter Saunders, born on 7 August 1920 in Framlingham, Victoria. Coming from a lineage of military service, his forebears having served in the Boer War and World War I, Saunders enlisted in the Australian Army in 1940. He served with distinction in North Africa, Greece and Crete. In 1944, Saunders broke significant barriers by becoming the first Aboriginal Australian to be commissioned as an officer, leading his men through the treacherous terrains of New Guinea. His leadership extended into the Korean War, where he commanded a

company at the Battle of Kapyong. Post-war, Saunders continued to advocate for Aboriginal rights, working within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

While Saunders's story is well-documented, many other Victorian Aboriginal servicemen contributed valiantly during the war, though their narratives remain less visible in mainstream accounts. It is believed that up to 150 Aboriginal men enlisted to serve their country. Their motivations for enlistment were multifaceted: a profound sense of duty to protect their homeland, the pursuit of equality within the ranks, and the hope that their service might pave the way for broader civil rights upon their return.



Despite their willingness to serve, Aboriginal servicemen faced significant hurdles. Official policies initially barred or restricted their enlistment. However, as the war intensified, especially after Japan's entry into the conflict, these restrictions were relaxed. Yet even in uniform, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal men to encounter discrimination from fellow servicemen and superiors. Post-war, many Aboriginal veterans, including those from Victoria, struggled to receive the same benefits and recognition as their non-Indigenous counterparts. It wasn't until decades later that efforts were made to acknowledge and honour their sacrifices appropriately.

Their legacy is profound. Victorian Aboriginal servicemen challenged prevailing stereotypes and laid the groundwork for subsequent generations to fight for civil rights and recognition. Their stories continue to inspire and remind us of the diverse contributions to Australia's military history.

In remembering figures like Reg Saunders and his compatriots, we honour not only their wartime service, but also their enduring impact on the journey toward equality and reconciliation in Australia.



BY 1947, AUSTRALIA WAS IN THE MIDST OF REINVENTION.

The war was over, and the country was gripped by a fever of optimism. Returned soldiers were given land. The economy roared back to life. Politicians spoke of *a fair go*, of prosperity, of a nation stepping into its rightful place on the world stage.

But this golden future was not for everyone.

For the vast majority of Aboriginal people, there were no generous reconstruction schemes, no promises of a better life. Of all the Aboriginal service men that fought for their country, only two are recorded as having received servicemen's blocks. For the vast majority of Aboriginal servicemen, however, their lands were still taken, their wages still stolen, their children still removed. They were, in the eyes of the law, still uncounted among the nation's population. A country that had just fought a war for freedom still refused to recognise the sovereignty of its first peoples.

The Australian Aborigines' League continued, its torch carried by figures like Bill Onus and Pastor Doug Nicholls, who established the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in 1957. The League laid the groundwork for the activism that would later drive the 1967 Referendum, the Land Rights movement, and the struggle for Treaty.

The fire lit in the 1930s is still aflame. It burns in every protest, every demand for justice, every act of resistance against a system that still seeks to silence First Nations voices. It burns in the knowledge that William Cooper's petition, though dismissed at the time, would be recognised decades later as a pivotal moment in Australia's long journey toward justice. It has led us to this moment, but along the way new generations would make their mark and instil their own legacies by adding to *our* collective heritage.

Members of the League travelled wherever they could. They stood before unmoved audiences, wrote countless letters to newspapers that *might* publish them, and carried petitions to governments that barely acknowledged their existence. They spoke to a country that did not listen, demanding rights from a government that had no intention of granting them.

In 1947, Thomas Shadrach James, William Cooper's nephew, walked into the Horsham Town Hall and spoke to the Country Women's Association (CWA). He was now Secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League, tirelessly working alongside his uncle and other members of the League.

His speech summarised the ongoing plight of his people. There were no microphones, no television cameras, no eager reporters waiting to publish his words. Just a room full of white women in pressed blouses and with quiet curiosity, watching as an Aboriginal man laid bare a truth they had never had to confront.

'The gradual extinction of the natives is almost sure,' he said. It was not a plea. It was a statement of fact.

He spoke of men and women left to die on missions where disinterest and disease had supplanted the bullets of the frontier. He spoke

of the hypocrisy of a nation that preached fairness while overseeing the slow destruction of its first peoples. He spoke of stolen wages and stolen land; of children torn from their families.

He did not ask for pity. He demanded action.

But how many in that room truly heard him? How many would return to their lives that afternoon, unchanged, as though his words were nothing more than an interruption to the gentle rhythms of post-war Australia?

Thomas Shadrach James, like William Cooper before him, knew that silence was the greatest enemy. And so the League refused to be silent.

It was backbreaking work. Writing hundreds of letters, signing thousands of names, walking miles to government offices only to be met with apathy—perhaps the worst kind of prejudice. Thousands of signatures delivered to a parliament that filed them away, unread.

And yet they did it again. And again. And again.

Pastor Doug Nicholls, ever the strategist, took the fight into spaces where it could not be ignored. He walked onto football fields, where white men respected his speed but not his humanity, and used his fame to turn small conversations into bigger ones. He moved through churches, trade unions, and backroom meetings where he knew he would never be truly welcome.

Aunty Margaret Tucker, who had lived through the brutal reality of the stolen wages system, carried that injustice with her into every speech, every letter, and every act of defiance. She never let the government forget that much of its prosperity had been built on the backs of Aboriginal labour, while the very people who cleared the land, picked the crops, and scrubbed the floors were left in poverty. Wages, when they were paid at all, were often withheld by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines,

funnelled into trust accounts that Aboriginal workers could rarely access.

This system of economic control wasn't a footnote to the policies of protection—it was central to them. Aboriginal people were expected to work—on pastoral stations, in domestic service, in factories—but they were denied the freedom to control their own earnings. Generations of Aboriginal families lived with this double burden: exploited for their labour, yet kept impoverished by design.

For Tucker, who was under the New South Wales Protection Board, this wasn't just history—it was lived experience. She had felt the sting of working for the benefit of others, all the while being told it was for her own good. And she made sure that the stolen wages remained part of the fight, a clear reminder that the state's theft extended beyond land and children—it reached into the very livelihoods of Aboriginal people, denying them the means to build a secure future for themselves and their families.

Bill Onus, sharp and unrelenting, stood in front of white audiences and made them see what they had spent their lives ignoring. He spoke of land that had never been ceded; of sovereignty that still existed despite the legal fiction of *terra nullius*.

And back in Melbourne, Christina Smith and Aunty Geraldine Briggs continued to organise, to care and to stand as examples for their own mob.

Together, they wrote. To the *Argus*, to the *Age*, the *Riverina Herald*—all of the major dailies. To any newspaper that would print them, and to those that wouldn't. They wrote not because they expected fairness, but because they knew that silence was another form of death.

This was what activism looked like in a country that had no place for it.

There were no grants, no funding, no offices. Everything was done in borrowed rooms, on borrowed time, by people who worked other jobs to survive. No microphones—only voices that strained to be heard over the disinterest of a nation that refused to listen. But they kept speaking. Because even if only ten people listened, that was enough. And even if only one carried that message beyond the walls of a meeting hall, then it had been worth the effort.

Because silence was defeat. And silence would not save them.

The AAL's defiance in the face of systemic repression exemplifies the resilience of Aboriginal political activism. They fought with words, signatures and peaceful protest—and though their victories were rare and hard-won, their resistance reshaped the landscape of Aboriginal rights in Australia.

AUTHENTICITY, EMPATHY AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE WAS AT THE CENTRE OF EVERY WORD WRITTEN, EVERY SPEECH GIVEN AND EVERY FOOTSTEP TAKEN.



The Australian Aborigines' League had been the first formal organisation of its kind—an assertion of political will at a time when the colony still debated whether Aboriginal people would survive at all.

Pastor Doug Nicholls, who could hold a crowd in the palm of his hand, emerged as one of the League's strongest leaders and the person to take its work forward. He was a pastor, a footballer and an orator who knew how to make Black voices impossible to ignore. On the football field, he was electric. A small man by VFL standards—just 5'2"—but lightning over the ground, weaving past men who underestimated him. Crowds came to watch him play for Fitzroy, marvelling at his speed, his skill, his ability to turn a game in seconds. But on the field, he was still just a spectacle to them—a Blackfella in a white man's game; allowed to dazzle, but never to belong.

Off the field, he saw the truth of it. Racism followed him from the locker rooms and into the streets; into the homes that no landlord would rent to an Aboriginal man, no matter how many games he had won.

So he found another stage.

He took to the pulpit not just to preach scripture, but to speak of justice. He had the kind of voice that could shake a room; that could make the comfortable shift uneasily in their seats. He spoke with the rhythm of an old-time revivalist—but instead of salvation, he called for land rights, wages and an end to the so-called 'protection acts' that strangled Aboriginal lives.

By the 1960s, a new generation of Aboriginal leaders emerged, determined not to wait for justice. They had watched their parents and grandparents fight within the system, petition governments and appeal to courts. The 1967 Referendum—which saw more than ninety per cent of Australians vote to amend the Constitution and count Aboriginal people in the census and give the federal government the power to legislate for Aboriginal affairs—had been heralded as a turning point. But it

was a turning point that, for many, turned back on itself.

At Yoorrook, witnesses spoke of the Referendum as a moment of both hope and disappointment. It promised inclusion but delivered little substantive change. Aboriginal people still faced poverty, exclusion and systemic racism in their daily lives. Aunty Jill Gallagher (Gunditjmara) reflected that despite the overwhelming vote, she was nearly twelve years old before she was recognised as a person in her own country. Her mother was in her forties. Yet the Referendum did not grant land rights, self-determination or meaningful power. It did not stop the government from withholding wages or controlling Aboriginal lives through various protection acts. It did not shield communities from the ongoing erosion of their lands by mining, agriculture and government policy.

The era that followed the Referendum saw a rise in activism fuelled by disillusionment. The Black Power movement, arriving from the United States in the late 1960s, ignited a new kind of political fire among Aboriginal youth.

Yoorrook heard how young leaders, including those from the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, began to demand greater control over their organisations. No longer content with playing supporting roles in their own liberation, they claimed leadership, asserting the right to define their own goals and strategies.

Gary Foley played a pivotal role in shaping the Aboriginal rights movement in Victoria during the height of the Black Power movement. His activism stretched from Redfern to Melbourne, where he became a defining figure at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) throughout the 1970s and '80s.

But Foley was not alone. The founding of VAHS was a community and collective effort led by Elders, including the late Aunty Edna Brown (Gunditjmara) and her daughter Aunty Alma Thorpe, who brought deep knowledge of the community's needs because they themselves were of the community. Together, they built a service grounded in the principle of Aboriginal control over Aboriginal affairs.

In Melbourne, Foley worked alongside Bruce McGuinness at VAHS, a service born from the community's refusal to accept substandard health care and government neglect. Foley, serving as Publicity Officer, became a vocal advocate who used his platform to challenge the state and rally support for Aboriginal-led initiatives. Together, Foley and McGuinness were a political force, defining the public and political face of VAHS. The service was more than a medical facility; it was a training ground for young Aboriginal leaders—many of whom grew up in its halls, absorbing the lessons of political advocacy and community care.

Foley's leadership was not limited to health care. His participation in the establishment of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service and his role in founding other community-controlled organisations across Victoria marked a shift in Aboriginal activism, from protest to institution-building. These organisations became lasting embodiments of Black Power philosophies, advocating for Aboriginal control of education, health care and legal services. Foley's influence, and that of his peers at VAHS, underscored a broader movement for sovereignty and self-determination that continues to resonate today.

IT WAS THE WOMEN WHO HELD THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER WHEN THE MEN WERE TAKEN—BY POLICE, BY THE SHEARING SHEDS, BY THE BOTTLE, BY THE PRISONS THAT SWALLOWED THEM WHOLE. IT WAS THE WOMEN WHO RAISED THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND, WHO ORGANISED, WHO TOILED; WHO MADE SURE THAT WHEN THE STATE CAME KNOCKING, IT WASN'T THE ONLY SIDE PREPARED TO FIGHT.

This was a period of ferment and frustration. Assimilation policies still informed government approaches, which sought to erode Aboriginal identities and cultures. Aboriginal people remained locked out of decisions about their lands. Wages were still stolen, and children were still taken. Mining operations sliced into Country without consent or compensation while governments profited from the exploitation of land that had never been ceded.

Had Australia faced its history more honestly—through a national truth-telling process like Yoorrook—perhaps the Referendum’s outcome might have seeded real change. If the stories of frontier massacres, land theft, and stolen wages had been laid bare to the nation, Australians might have voted with a fuller understanding of what justice requires. But that reckoning never came. The nation embraced symbolic change, but recoiled from its substance.

**WE WILL NEVER KNOW
WHAT MIGHT HAVE
BEEN. YET IN THESE
TESTIMONIES—OF
STOLEN LAND, BROKEN
PROMISES AND ENDURING
RESISTANCE—THE NEED
FOR TRUTH-TELLING IS
UNMISTAKABLE.**



Before the city swallowed it, before gentrification smoothed its rough edges, before the cafés and boutiques, Gertrude Street in Fitzroy belonged to Blackfellas. It was the artery that pulsed with the lifeblood of a people who had been pushed from everywhere else. It was where feet landed when there was nowhere left to go, where voices rose in laughter and defiance, where families found one another again after generations of forced dispersal.

The streets smelled of damp stone and cigarette smoke, of old beer and the sweat of men looking for work. The boarding houses sagged under the weight of too many bodies crammed into too little space, but they were better than the reserves; better than the tin-walled humpies the government had called housing. Here, at least, no welfare officer could knock on your door and decide that your children would be better off somewhere else.

They came because the colony had made them landless. Because the stations and missions had stripped them of wages and freedom, because the old places where their people had lived for thousands of years had been fenced off, sold, poisoned with cattle hooves and wheat.

Fitzroy was never home in the way that Country had been, but it was a place to start over—a place where you might hear your language spoken; where you might catch sight of an uncle you hadn’t seen since he was taken by the government; where you might, just for a moment, feel whole again.

By the 1940s, Fitzroy had become an Aboriginal enclave, but it was no sanctuary. The police patrolled the streets like predators, their vans trawling for Black bodies. Public drunkenness, loitering, offensive language—these were the crimes that kept people cycling in and out of the Russell Street cells; sometimes walking out

bruised and broken, sometimes not walking out at all. The state called it justice.

But justice had never been written for us. So we wrote our own.



The revolution was shaped by the hands of women.

It was the women who held the community together when the men were taken—by police, by the shearing sheds, by the bottle, by the prisons that swallowed them whole. It was the women who raised the children left behind, who organised, who toiled; who made sure that when the state came knocking, it wasn't the only side prepared to fight.

Women like Aunty Geraldine Briggs, Aunty Hyllus Maris, Aunty Alma Thorpe, and Aunty Margaret Tucker had lived through every phase of colonial brutality. They were the stolen children who grew into the warriors who would not let it happen again. If the government would not protect their people, then these women would build the institutions that did.

At VAHS, there were no white gatekeepers deciding who was worthy of care. It was a place that Elders could enter without fear; where children could be treated by people who understood them; where community health meant more than just medicine—it meant healing, in every sense of the word.

VAHS was created in this spirit of pragmatic defiance—not as charity, but as resistance. The doctors who worked there didn't do it for a wage: initially, there was no wage. They did it because Aboriginal people were dying in hospital corridors, because medical racism was just another extension of frontier violence,

and because self-determination meant saving our own.

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), created a year earlier, was a fledgling service formed in direct response to police brutality, and to the endless cycle of over-policing and imprisonment. If the courts were designed to swallow up Black lives, then VALS would stand at the gates, demanding justice.



THE FIGHT WAS NEVER LIMITED TO THE STREETS. IT WAS IN THE HOMES, IN THE SILENCES, IN THE WOUNDS CARRIED ACROSS GENERATIONS.

Family violence was never part of our way. Lore was built on kinship and respect—on the understanding that to harm one person was to harm the whole community. It held people accountable not through fear, but through connection. But colonisation did not only take land. It dismantled culture. It disrupted structure. It tore apart the systems that once kept us safe.

All these things were broken into a million sharp and ragged pieces. Hard enough to see in the glare of full light; impossible to see in the dark.

The state engendered violence in the missions, in the boys' homes, in the institutions where Aboriginal children were beaten for speaking their language, where they grew into men who had never been given the space to grieve or heal.

The police were never there when women needed protection. They only arrived when there were handcuffs to be filled.

The system was never going to save us. So we built our own.



This is what self-determination really meant: creating the things that the government refused to give us, rather than waiting for them to deem us worthy.

VALS stood between our people and a justice system designed to break them. It defended those who the court treated as guilty before they'd spoken a word. It fought to stop another Stolen Generation in the making.

VAHS made sure Aboriginal people didn't have to walk into a hospital and wonder whether they would walk out again. It wasn't just a health service—it was a place where culture and medicine walked hand in hand, and where people could be treated by their own.

These services were more than buildings. They were shields. They were survival. They were proof that Aboriginal people would not just endure, but fight, build and reclaim.



Despite policies intended to smother Aboriginal voices, First Peoples found ways to speak louder. Sometimes it began with a single classroom; a lone voice refusing to be ignored or misunderstood. At other times, it began in the kitchen of a Fitzroy terrace, over billy tea and whispered dreams of control—of services, of systems, of story.

For a long time, education had been an apparatus of erasure. Children were taught not

to remember, but to forget. Culture was framed as a deficit. In schools across Victoria, Aboriginal children were made to feel absent no matter their presence. It was a curriculum built on denial, and its impact was devastating.

But the counterforce was forming. First in the streets of Fitzroy, in makeshift classrooms. Elders began to gather; not just to protest, but to create. They recognised that to truly change the future, they needed to teach it on their own terms.

Aunty Alma Thorpe was among the first to light the fire of this new thinking. Her work establishing the Koori Kollij drew from the barefoot doctors of China, planting the seed of culturally grounded health education that would later branch into the structure of VAHS and beyond. From the 1970s onwards, Aboriginal education became more than survival: it became strategy.

In 1976, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) was formed to ensure that Koorie voices were not just heard, but also held authority within the education system. Born from a time of intense community organising, and led by Elders and activists who had long fought to be more than subjects of policy, VAEAI created space for Aboriginal parents, educators and communities to co-design schooling. It was not merely an advocacy body—it was an assertion of cultural and educational sovereignty. VAEAI worked to embed culture into curriculum, support Koorie education workers and transform the experience of schooling into something that could affirm rather than erase identity.

By the time the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation took root, and later with the formation of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), health education had expanded into

something larger: a movement of knowledge reclamation. These were not just health services. They were living archives, where Elders passed on language, kinship systems, and the blueprints of community-controlled governance. Places where younger generations could look up from their desks and see a reflection that made sense.

The Institute of Koorie Education (later the NIKERI Institute) would carry that legacy into the academy, guided by Elders including Aunty Alma Thorpe. It was a gentle but unrelenting challenge to the colonial knowledge systems that had long dominated institutions like the University of Melbourne. These institutions were beginning—slowly, sometimes reluctantly—to reckon with the thefts upon which they were built. First Peoples began to appear in their archives and speak in their lecture halls.

These efforts culminated not in a single organisation, but in a network. The VACCHO, VAHS, the Australian Aborigines' League, Aboriginal Community Elders Services Inc (ACES), Yappera Children's Service Cooperative, Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Sport & Recreation (MAYSAR)—each a node of resistance, of resilience. Each one emerged from community, not government. Each one told the state: *You cannot serve us unless we are the ones serving.*

From classrooms to committees, from lecture halls to community halls, the story of Aboriginal education in Victoria is not one of access granted, but one of sovereignty asserted. It is not a story of inclusion, but of resurgence. These were not reforms gifted by the state, but pathways carved through it.

The state had once tried to teach First Peoples out of existence. First Peoples responded by teaching the state how to listen.



Fitzroy was more than just a gathering-place: it was the frontline. It was where First Peoples came after being pushed off Country, and where they found one another again. It was where Black Power met self-determination; where protest became policy. The movement that would change the future was born in rented houses and in the back-rooms of pubs, in legal offices run on overdrafts and in medical clinics run on hope.

The work begun in Fitzroy did not end there.

The generation that built VAHS and VALS paved the way for Treaty negotiations, land rights victories, and the survival of our people on our own terms. And though Fitzroy has changed, its history is still written in the bluestone, in the laneways, in the blood and breath of those who walked before.



By the late 1990s, a moral reckoning stirred the nation. The *Bringing Them Home* report, tabled in 1997, gave voice to what Aboriginal families had long known—that children were taken, families broken, and the state had sanctioned these removals in the name of assimilation. The testimonies spoke of wounds carried across generations, etched into bodies, silences, and lost names.

That same year, Premier Jeff Kennett stood in the Victorian Parliament and offered a formal apology. 'This House apologises to the Aboriginal people on behalf of all Victorians for the past policies under which Aboriginal children were removed from their families,' he said, 'and expresses deep regret at the hurt and distress this has caused and reaffirms its support for reconciliation between all Australians.'

It was a symbolic act, yet potent—a moment where the machinery of government paused;

where those in power turned towards the dispossessed and expressed contrition.

This was the season of *sorry*. A dawning belief, perhaps, that truth-telling could effect repair.

During the same period, native title was emerging nationally as the legal answer to the protracted fight for land rights.

BUT IN VICTORIA, NATIVE TITLE WAS FRAUGHT FROM THE OUTSET. THE COLONY HAD SEEN TO THAT A LONG TIME AGO.



Native title was meant to be a solution. After the High Court's 1992 *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* decision, which found that Native Title 'survives the Crown's acquisition of sovereignty', the government promised a path forwards—a mechanism through which Aboriginal people could reclaim what had been stolen.

The courts would recognise what had always been true: that the land had never been ceded. But in Victoria, native title was doomed from the outset. The colony had seen to that a long time ago.

By the time the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) was introduced, much of the land had already been carved up, fenced off, bought and sold.

Native title might exist in theory, but in Victoria, and in practice, there was very little land left to recognise it on.

More than that, the legal standard was almost impossibly high. The Court required that Native title was only available where Aboriginal people could prove an 'unbroken connection' to land—that law and custom had remained 'substantially uninterrupted' since the time of British invasion. But how could Aboriginal people meet that test when the state itself had spent nearly two centuries severing the very connections it now demanded?

These contradictions were laid bare in the case of the Yorta Yorta people.

In 1996, the Yorta Yorta brought their claim to the Federal Court, seeking recognition of what they had always known—that the land and waters were theirs, that it had never been ceded, and that their connection to it had never truly been broken. Their Country lies across the riverine plains of what is now known as the Goulburn Broken Catchment, spanning a vast area across north-eastern Victoria and into southern New South Wales. This landscape includes the confluence of the Goulburn and Murray rivers and reaches across lands from west of Cohuna to the east near Albury-Wodonga, extending northward past Finley and southward towards Nagambie. These are lands deeply connected to story, to water, to belonging—though today, some of these areas are also subject to overlapping claims and understandings of Country by different Traditional Owner groups; a sad legacy of colonial lines being imposed on sacred Country and sacred lore.

This was the ground that fed them, the waters that sustained them. A map of the places where their stories were made and remade.

But the court was not built to recognise Aboriginal sovereignty. It was built to destroy it.

Like many other Aboriginal nations in Victoria, the Yorta Yorta had been displaced from their

Country, confined to missions and reserves, regulated by protection acts. Their culture had been smothered, their movements restricted, their children taken. And still, they survived—holding ceremony in secret, keeping language hushed in corners, maintaining knowledge in forms the state refused to see.

The legal system did not consider this survival. It saw only interruption.

In 1998, Justice Howard Olney ruled that the ‘tide of history’ had ‘washed away’ the Yorta Yorta’s right to native title. Though he acknowledged their deep ancestral connection to Country, he relied heavily on the evidence of nineteenth-century squatter Edward Curr to conclude that the Yorta Yorta’s laws and customs had not remained continuous in a form recognisable to the court. In 2002, the High Court upheld the decision, applying these same laws.

The impact was devastating. Not just for the Yorta Yorta, but for Aboriginal claimants across Victoria where colonisation’s impact had been long, deep and disruptive. The case confirmed what many already knew: native title was not about returning land in all situations. It demanded restrictive tests of continuity where colonisation made for rupture.

The court privileged colonial records—settler diaries, police logs, government reports—while dismissing oral histories and cultural knowledge passed down through generations. It demanded perfection from people who had survived the very system that sought to destroy them.

The heartbreak of the Yorta Yorta decision lingers still. It was a legal loss, yes—but more than that, it was a denial of identity, of memory, of survival. ‘Not one iota,’ William Cooper had written in 1939: not one iota of land had been returned to his people. Sixty years later, the court had proven him right.

And yet the fight did not end there.

The Yorta Yorta instead turned towards negotiation, cultural renewal and land agreements. They gained recognition as ‘original owners’ in 2004 from the Victorian Government and became stakeholders in managing the land and waters of the region. They refused to let the settler state define who they were. The court had said the tide of history had washed them away. But the river still knew their names.

Ultimately, the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Dadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk peoples were the first to secure native title recognition in 2005. The Gunditjmara then followed in 2007, Gunaikurnai in 2010 and the Gunditjmara and Eastern Maar with a shared determination in 2011.

These landmark outcomes were rightfully celebrated: they had built important foundations for those communities, and opened the door for others to follow.

But the human and financial costs were high, with the process painfully slow and complex, and outcomes firmly on the settlers’ terms.



When the Gunaikurnai people won their native title determination in 2010, it was celebrated as a landmark—but even that victory came with limits. Their claim covered 22,000 square kilometres of Crown land in Gippsland, yet it excluded all land already held in freehold: the towns, farms and businesses that made up most of their Country.

Even where native title was recognised, it came with restrictions. Gunaikurnai people could hunt, fish, and perform ceremony—but they could not own the land in the way settlers could. They were required to co-manage their own Country under agreements with the state.

This was the best-case scenario.

For most Aboriginal nations in Victoria, even this limited recognition remained out of reach. Forced removals, missions, protection acts, stolen wages, child removal—none of these were accepted as legal justifications for the loss of connection. Instead, they were used as proof that connection had already been lost. If laws and customs had been ‘interrupted’, then native title could not exist. The people, the court said, were no longer there—even as they stood in the courtroom.

This is what native title became in Victoria: a legal sleight of hand. It acknowledged dispossession but offered very little in return. It promised land but delivered only protracted litigation.

IT DEMANDED PROOF OF CULTURAL SURVIVAL WHILE IGNORING THE SYSTEM DESIGNED TO DESTROY IT. AND SO THE FIGHT EVOLVED.



When it became clear that native title could not meet the needs of Victoria’s First Peoples, communities began to think outside the box. In 2010, the state introduced the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (Vic)—‘TOSA’—allowing Aboriginal groups to negotiate directly with the government instead of relying on the courts; a process that had too often required First Peoples to litigate their own existence.

But this shift didn’t occur by accident. It was carried forward by the tireless work of the

Victorian Traditional Owner Land Justice Group—an unincorporated alliance of leaders and Elders, each representing their own nations, but united in a shared determination. Figures like Uncle Graham Atkinson (Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung) and Uncle Gary Murray (Dhudhuroa, Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wamba Wemba, Wergaia, Wiradjeri, Waywurru) helped lead this charge, building from the ashes of the Yorta Yorta decision—a decision that Atkinson described as a ‘deep wound’, felt personally, by his family, and across the Yorta Yorta nation.

The Land Justice Group was born out of that hurt, but also out of hope. Convened in 2005, the group became the voice through which Traditional Owners pressed the state government for something better—a process that could settle claims outside of the courtroom, in a way that honoured connection rather than erasing it. Their advocacy forced the state to the table. This began a long negotiation that culminated in TOSA delivered with the Brumby Government.

It wasn’t easy. The Land Justice Group’s vision was expansive: not just to secure land, but to reshape the process itself. They called for the transfer of culturally significant Crown land, recognition of hunting and fishing rights, frameworks for economic development, and the restoration of cultural heritage management to Traditional Owners. ‘We were determined,’ Atkinson told Yoorrook, ‘to continue the struggle of our ancestors in the hope our children wouldn’t need to fight for land justice.’

Their strategy was built on partnership and persistence. Negotiation, not litigation. Collaboration, not conflict. And the result—the Traditional Owner Settlement Act—stands as a testament to that work: a framework that recognises what native title could not. It recognises that the connection to Country

is not a relic of the past but a living, evolving relationship; not something to be measured against colonial expectations but honoured on its own terms.

It was still a compromise, but one shaped through negotiation rather than adversarial denial.

The first outcome under the TOSA was secured in October 2010, when the Gunaikurnai people negotiated a combined native title consent determination and a Recognition and Settlement Agreement (RSA) under the TOSA. The Dja Dja Wurrung followed, securing their own landmark RSAs in 2013 that included land transfers, financial compensation, and co-management of national parks. The Taungurung secured their RSA in 2018.

In 2022, the Barenji Gadjin Land Council signed an RSA with the State Government on behalf of the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk People of the Wotjobaluk Nations. And the Eastern Maar People secured further native title recognition in 2023, with work to secure an RSA ongoing.

More than thirty years on from the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), and fifteen years on from TOSA, many Victorian groups are still waiting—and fighting—for their claims to be prioritised, resourced, resolved. For recognition of what they have always known.

This is the lesson Victoria ought to have learned. Native Title was meant to be a recognition of sovereignty. Instead, it became another instrument of delay, denial and dispossession.

Still, Aboriginal people continue to push forwards. Not through the courts alone. Not through the same legal tricks that have been used against them for generations. But through persistence. Through negotiation. Through demands that cannot be ignored.

**THE LAND WAS NEVER
CEDED. NATIVE TITLE COULD
NOT RETURN IT. BUT THE
STRUGGLE IS NOT OVER. IT
HAS ONLY CHANGED.**

THE EDGE OF SOMETHING NEW AND ANCIENT

For centuries, the politics of the colony worked against First Peoples. The structures built around Aboriginal lives were never meant to serve Aboriginal people. They were designed to control, to exclude and to confine. The weight of words—and the promises they carried—had meant little. Treaties had been ignored. Agreements broken.

Today, the language has changed. There are forums, partnership agreements, frameworks, strategies, policies, action plans. There are taskforces and steering committees. Government speaks of co-design, of listening, of walking together. The apparatus of consultation is now so embedded that many young First Peoples have known nothing else. They've grown up inside a system that promises change, but rarely delivers it. Access to power is no longer the barrier: there's plenty of access via the ears of senior advisers and ministers' clerks. But still, outcomes flatline—or worse, go backwards.

And yet something else is happening, too.

If governments have failed to shift the material conditions of Aboriginal lives, First Peoples have shifted the culture. They have staked a claim on the air itself—through community radio, Aboriginal-led podcasts, and television. Voices once relegated to the margins now speak daily across the country: hosting, broadcasting, analysing, storytelling, correcting the record in real time. The media space, once wholly inhabited by settlers, is now a place of resistance and revival.

In literature, too, the mirror is being held aloft. A growing chorus of Aboriginal authors are telling their stories on their own terms; from the classroom to the courtroom, from the mission dormitory to the kitchen table. These writers are not just preserving memory—they are remaking the national narrative, one sentence at a time.

Authors like Alexis Wright, Tony Birch and Tara June Winch have pushed beyond the periphery, their words stitching the threads of ancient storytelling traditions into the fabric of contemporary life. Wright's *Carpentaria*, sprawling and mythic, reimagines place and belonging. Winch's *The Yield* gives voice to language itself, resisting the erasures of colonisation by reclaiming Wiradjuri words.

This chorus does not rise from literature alone. Across the arts, sport, and public life, First Peoples have carried culture forward, speaking truth to power, offering beauty, resistance and resilience. They have carved out spaces where none existed, created new languages in music, dance, film and poetry—languages that reach across the divides of this nation.

In music, Archie Roach's voice has been both lament and anthem, a reminder that the story of stolen children is not history—it is lived memory. His songs, like 'Took the Children Away', carry the weight of truth and the balm of connection. Artists like Briggs, Baker Boy, BARKAA and Mo'Ju Juju speak to younger generations, blending language and beats, pulling the oldest traditions into modern soundscapes.

In sport, Cathy Freeman's golden lap at the Sydney Olympics stands not only as a personal triumph but as a moment when the nation was asked to confront its own reflection. The image of Freeman, draped in both the Australian and Aboriginal flags, endures as a symbol of dual identity, of what this place might become.

Painters like Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Albert Namatjira carried Country onto canvas, translating landscape into texture and colour, teaching non-Indigenous Australia to see the land differently—to see it as already marked by millennia of knowledge and presence.

In film and theatre, the likes of Rachel Perkins, Warwick Thornton, Leah Purcell and the late

Uncle Jack Charles have turned the lens back, reframing histories too often told from outside.

These storytellers, singers, dancers, sportspeople and cultural leaders have brought First Peoples' worlds into the wider public consciousness. They have been translators, but never on colonial terms. Their work does not ask for permission. It claims space.

They have remade the narrative not with the blunt tools of politics, but with the sharper instruments of art and truth.

For too long, Aboriginal people have been overrepresented in the statistics that shame the nation—incarceration, suicide, child removal, chronic illness. But they are also overrepresented in excellence. In academia, in science, in journalism, in the arts, in music, in sport. They dominate fields that were never designed for them to enter. They carry brilliance forged through struggle—and it shines.

There is power in this visibility, but also a caution: excellence should not be mistaken for justice. Success does not erase suffering. It does not restore dispossession. It does, however, defy the colonial narrative that was meant to render First Peoples invisible, voiceless and gone.

The limits placed on us by the state have had the opposite effect. They have made us limitless.

So while governments speak the language of reform, Aboriginal people continue to create the reality of change—through culture, through knowledge, through refusal. Not waiting for permission. Not waiting for the frameworks to deliver. But carving out new futures with tools that have always been theirs: story, song, survival and fire.

Victoria's truth must be uncovered if people are to understand why so many of the descendants of those honoured in these pages are taking the next step: truth and Treaty.



It was never a gift. The promise of Treaty in Victoria did not fall from the sky or arrive neatly wrapped in the rhetoric of reconciliation. It was prised open, carved out by generations of resistance—by the ones who marched when it was dangerous, who stood firm when it would've been easier to step back, who held the stories and kept the fire burning.

By the time the Andrews Labor Government formally committed to Treaty, the ground had already been shifting beneath the colonial foundations for some time. First Peoples had long been building the architecture of a new future, plank by plank, out of truth and determination.

This was not a beginning, but a turning.

At the heart of this shift was Auntie Jill Gallagher, appointed as Victoria's first Treaty Advancement Commissioner. A Gunditjmara woman, survivor of the policies that once tried to erase her, she stepped into the role with clarity and purpose. Her task was not simple: to lay the groundwork for a Treaty process that would be led by Aboriginal people themselves. She travelled the state, meeting with communities, listening to hopes and hesitations, translating the enormity of Treaty into something tangible. Her leadership bridged generations—honouring the old people who had fought for land, rights and dignity, while making space for the young ones ready to take up the work.

Out of that labour, the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria was born in 2019—elected by and for Aboriginal people. It was a statement of sovereignty in action. Not granted. Not symbolic. But real. Political. Ongoing.

But Treaty, the Assembly knew, could not come without truth.

