

# 1. Introduction

*The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know.*

Harry S Truman

In late 1927 an Aboriginal man wrote an inspiring letter to a young Aboriginal girl abused within the government-operated Aboriginal apprenticeship system. He offered support and encouragement, advising the girl she was but one of many Aboriginal girls suffering sexual abuse within the scheme. He asked for details of those responsible, and promised that he would see the perpetrator in court. Clearly shaken by the girl's experience, his anguish and anger is readily revealed in the text:

My heart is filled with regret and disgust. First because you were taken down by those who were supposed to be your help and guide through life. What a wicked conception, what a fallacy. Under the so-called pretence and administration of the Board, governmental control etc. I say deliberately. The whole damnable thing has got to stop and by God[s] help it shall, make no mistake. No doubt, they are trying to exterminate the Noble and Ancient Race of sunny Australia. Away with the damnable insulting methods. Give us a hand, stand by your own Native Aboriginal Officers and fight for liberty and freedom for yourself and your children.<sup>1</sup>

The man who wrote that letter was Fred Maynard, and this is his story.

Maynard is one of the great forgotten Aboriginal patriots and an organiser of political activism. He was born, appropriately enough, on Independence Day, 4 July 1879, at Hinton, near Maitland in New South Wales. He was instrumental in forming the first unified and long-lasting politically motivated and organised Aboriginal movement, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). He proved to be an exceptional man, an

inspiring leader and spokesman, and a compassionate visionary who rose up to defend his people's rights.

Maynard's story is deeply entwined in the tragedy of Aboriginal experience and the origins and early development of organised Aboriginal political activism of the twentieth century. From the outset of European occupation, Aboriginal history has been denigrated and distorted to the level of myth, legend, fable and even fairytale. More recently, writing about the Aboriginal presence has been presented as being completely outside the mainstream Australian historical landscape.

My evaluation of Fred Maynard and the organisation he led, the AAPA, is of critical importance to the revision of Australian Aboriginal history. The AAPA is now rightfully recognised as the precursor of the Aboriginal political movement. Yet for several decades the deeds and struggles of the AAPA were largely ignored, misunderstood, forgotten and hidden, its legacy fading into oblivion.

I unashamedly acknowledge the deep personal significance of the story of Fred Maynard and the AAPA, both from the perspective of an Aboriginal man conveying an Aboriginal viewpoint of Australian history, and because Fred Maynard was my grandfather. I openly declare that the matter is close to my heart; my desire is to see the story told.

Sadly, Fred died eight years before my birth so I never had the opportunity of meeting this remarkable Aboriginal patriot except through documents, photographs and oral memories. The story is of unquestionable importance to my own family as it highlights the high levels of commitment and sacrifices that Fred, his compatriots and their families made in their constant battle to improve Aboriginal conditions at a particularly difficult and challenging time in Aboriginal history.

Opposition to the British invasion of Australia is not some new-found strength and ideology that Aboriginal people have suddenly discovered or stumbled upon. It did not spring from the Mabo decision or the *Native Title Act*, nor was its birth solely a result of the vibrant 1960s, which culminated in the establishment of the famous Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra.

It is true that the 1960s was a time of excitement and turmoil in Australian politics: expansion of the Cold War, the escalation of the divisive war in Vietnam, and confrontation over civil rights for Black America filled the TV screens and airwaves. None of this went unnoticed by Aboriginal people. They marched, protested, spoke out and wrote of the injustices of the past and present. To many people, the period seemed to mark the origins of Black political consciousness in Australia. In 1965 Charles Perkins led the freedom rides through New South Wales, 1966

witnessed the Gurindji walk-off at Wave-Hill, Aboriginal people played a significant part in achieving the overwhelming 'Yes' vote in the 1967 referendum. The establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in 1972 seemed to reaffirm the arrival of an organised and united Aboriginal political movement.

There are numerous examples of the influence that international Black politics had on Aboriginal political activism during this period. In 1972, Paul Coe stated:

Black Power in Australia is a policy of self-assertion, self-identity. It is our policy, at least as far as we in the city are concerned ... to endeavour to encourage Black Culture, the relearning, the reinstating of black culture wherever it is possible ... The Afro-American culture, as far as the majority of blacks in Sydney are concerned, is the answer to a lot of black problems because this is the international culture of the black people.<sup>2</sup>

No less a voice than the incomparable Malcom X perceptively commented on the oppressed position of Aboriginal Australians in 1965:

The aboriginal Australian isn't even permitted to get into a position where he can make his voice heard in any way, shape or form. But I don't think that situation will last much longer.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is obvious that Malcom X had no comprehension or knowledge that an Aboriginal political voice had been active, constant and outspoken against prejudice and oppression for decades, and that there had been a substantial and sustained international Black influence in that process. He went on to say:

Just as racism has become an international thing, the fight against it is also becoming international. Those who were the victims of it and were kept apart from each other are beginning to compare notes. They are beginning to find that it doesn't stem from their country alone. It is international. We intend to fight it internationally.<sup>4</sup>

What Malcom X was proposing was not in fact something new; rather, it was more of a united tradition of opposition by oppressed groups around the world. But this tradition had already existed; its history had largely been forgotten or erased.

Politically, the 1920s and 1930s were as tumultuous and as international in their outlook as the 1960s. Some people may remember William Cooper, Bill Ferguson, Pearl Gibbs and Jack Patten. These eminent Aboriginal freedom fighters were prominent during the late 1930s and instigated the 1938 'Day of Mourning' protest in Sydney during the celebrations of Australia's 150th anniversary of European settlement. Some observers

have remarked that Aboriginal protest groups of the Cooper, Ferguson and Patten era were ‘neither the most articulate nor the most influential’,<sup>5</sup> but this fails to acknowledge the constraints and thinking of their period. The supposed and enforced superiority of the white place in the world was, from a white perspective, unquestioned and unchallenged. It has been observed that Ferguson and Patten actually embraced ‘the notion that blacks deserved citizenship and equality via complete absorption into mainstream Australia by assimilation’.<sup>6</sup> Professor Eric Willmot — a noted Aboriginal academic and author — believed that ‘this appeared to lead Aborigines in the 1930s and 1940s towards outright rejection of their primary identity’.<sup>7</sup>

Willmot concluded that Ferguson’s demands were ‘a plea by mixed race Aborigines to be recognised as Europeans’.<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Stokes, commenting in *The Politics of Australian Identity*, tried to confirm Willmot’s analysis when he concluded that ‘in the 1930s and 1940s, when they were arguing for full citizenship rights, Aborigines relied on a conception of identity that suppressed notions of Aboriginal difference from Europeans’.<sup>9</sup>

However, these assumptions have overlooked the fact that Aboriginal people during this period had been exposed to high levels of assimilationist propaganda, indoctrination and restrictive policy. The response that Ferguson, Patten, Gibbs, Cooper and their followers instigated was the only option by which they could ensure the survival of Aboriginal peoples and histories, all of which were under attack from restrictive government assimilation policies.

Whether Willmot and Stokes are right or not, I shall show that a decade earlier, with Fred Maynard and the AAPA, such an approach would have been totally unacceptable. Writing about the 1920s political scene, historian and academic Heather Goodall said that:

The 1920s activists had felt free to make clear assertion of the value and continuation of Aboriginal traditional culture, insisting that they must be recognised as civilised by virtue of *both* ‘our more ancient civilisation’ and their competence within European culture. The 1930s movement felt no such freedom, and avoided the topic altogether.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, she went on to remark that:

the confident and proud public assertions of the value of traditional civilisation which Fred Maynard had been able to make in the 1920s were therefore not to be heard in the 1930s political statements. This made it difficult to argue for any rights to land, which arose from prior possession based on traditional law and continuing traditional affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

It is critical to remember that the 1930s organisation the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) was a different group entirely to the 1920s AAPA. Extraordinarily, none of the (senior) activists from the 1920s were visible in the late 1930s. Some have argued that the 1930s campaign was fundamentally about civil rights and not so much about Aboriginal rights, particularly in relation to land. Personally, I think they were no less radical, from their demands to be recognised as equal citizens to the pride in identity and Black nationalism, which was the dominant Aboriginal platform twelve years before. However, a clear distinction does need to be made.

Much of the confusion between the politics and climate of the AAPA in the 1920s, and that of the APA in the 1930s and 1940s, is due to a simple lack of research. It was not until 1974, when Jack Horner published his benchmark study of Bill Ferguson and the APA, that any post-war mention at all of the earlier AAPA surfaced. Discussion of the AAPA only came about through the memory of Charlie Leon, an Aboriginal man 'who had left home at Forster in 1920, earning a labourer's living anywhere he could, was working on the Cotter Dam near Canberra in 1926, but two years later was running a vaudeville troupe, "Leon's Entertainers"'.<sup>12</sup> Leon travelled widely with his show and witnessed firsthand discrimination and prejudice. He described to Horner a meeting with Bill Ferguson, during which they discussed the need to establish an Aboriginal political voice. During this meeting Leon told Ferguson about the AAPA, 'led by a "livewire" Aboriginal named Fred Maynard: but nobody heard of it now'.<sup>13</sup> Ferguson responded that he had knowledge of them and that they 'held three annual conferences, but were hounded by the police officer acting for the Protection Board'.

This short acknowledgment was instrumental in establishing a number of incorrect assumptions: firstly that the AAPA ceased operations in 1927, and secondly that the organisation was confined to Sydney. Horner later wrote to me that, at the time he wrote his book, there was little or no readily available information of the AAPA or on Fred Maynard. He had come across only scant information and simply assumed that they had either made little impact, or that no substantial records remained of the organisation.<sup>14</sup>

On the availability of this slight evidence, subsequent academics and historians followed Horner's lead uncritically and concluded that Ferguson and the APA signalled the onset of an organised Aboriginal political agenda. This theory simply rested on the fact that no one had gone back further than the late-1930s organisation or been fortunate enough to uncover substantive material to argue against the theory. This changed in

1982 when Heather Goodall produced her doctoral thesis 'A history of Aboriginal communities in NSW 1909–39', and her subsequent book, *Invasion to Embassy*.

Goodall discovered material relating to the AAPA, most notably letters and petitions written by Fred Maynard to the New South Wales State Government and the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board. The most important discovery was in a Newcastle newspaper, *The Voice of the North*, edited by John J Moloney — a fierce nationalist. To his credit, Moloney gave Aboriginal leaders such as Maynard and Tom Lacey editorial space and concerted press coverage and support. Goodall's findings established that the AAPA was much more than some small Sydney-centred organisation. Her work uncovered information on the make-up of the organisation and its platform, one which centred on land rights, citizenship, protection of Aboriginal culture, called for a royal commission into Aboriginal affairs, and a concerted attempt to end the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families.

The onset of organised Aboriginal political agitation in 1924 had seen Aborigines publicly voicing dissatisfaction about their treatment by white Australia through street rallies, meetings and conferences. The AAPA initiated a concerted and united Aboriginal front, bringing it to the notice of the media and the wider public for the first time.

Importantly, the organisation had studied the international racial situation in Africa, the United States and in other parts of the globe, and used its knowledge of world events to its advantage. The AAPA proved to be a revelation and an inspiration to Aborigines. They petitioned at all political levels: the radical Labor State Premier of New South Wales, Jack Lang; the conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce; the Governor General, Baron Stonehaven; one member even had the audacity to send correspondence as a formal petition to Buckingham Palace beseeching King George V to intervene in the treatment of Aboriginal people.<sup>15</sup>

The measure of the AAPA's success at generating knowledge and interest among Aboriginal communities and across considerable distances can be measured by comparing attendance levels at meetings. In 1939 the western branch of the APA attracted sixty Murrumbidgee to its second annual general meeting in Dubbo;<sup>16</sup> the 1938 'Day of Mourning' protest in Sydney attracted 100 people;<sup>17</sup> and the coastal faction of the APA led by Jack Patten in mid-1938 could boast an active membership of 118 members.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the AAPA (in 1925, after only six months of operation) had established eleven branches and a membership which exceeded 500 Aboriginal people.<sup>19</sup> The area the AAPA covered included vast regions of New South Wales — from the south coast through Sydney

and Newcastle to the mid to far-north coast and west to inland centres such as Angledool. Knowledge of the AAPA's activities received coverage in South Australia and Queensland. The AAPA attracted over 250 Kooris to its first annual general conference in Sydney, and nearly tripled that with several hundred Kooris attending its second conference in Kempsey in 1925.<sup>20</sup>

The AAPA took a carefully organised political stance that had the authorities at a loss at how to deal with such an unexpected and persistent form of agitation. Here was an Aboriginal group that played a supporting role in establishing a hostel at Homebush in Sydney for Aboriginal girls who had run away from white employers after maltreatment. Once knowledge of the Aboriginal support for this home became available to the authorities, Church support for the home was withdrawn and it was subjected to constant police surveillance, interference and threat. The AAPA applied and won the right to be incorporated as a company against the direct opposition of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, which had even sought the advice of a Crown solicitor on how to halt that very process. It was a rare occasion during that time for the Board to feel the heat of the media and public scrutiny.

Fred Maynard, Tom Lacey, Sid Ridgeway, Dick Johnson and the other Aboriginal leaders of the AAPA realised that the institutionalised framework set in place by governments and their agencies was an orchestrated and sinister mechanism supporting an ideology that held horrific implications for Aboriginal Australia. Lacey, Ridgeway and Johnson were close friends and colleagues of Maynard and were influential office bearers of the AAPA. They were well informed, not just of Aboriginal issues but also of national and international awareness and understanding of racial issues. They realised that the whole process was about the complete disintegration of Aboriginal culture and its absorption into white society.<sup>21</sup> In light of the events of the decades that followed, their fears were clearly valid and vindicated.

For white Australians the most unsettling aspect of the AAPA was the fact that it was led by a self-educated and well-educated Aboriginal man with a great command of both the spoken and written word. Maynard spoke and wrote passionately and insightfully about the injustices and atrocities committed against Aboriginal people. He spoke of things that either many white people did not know or were not aware of, or simply did not want to know. The power of the message that Maynard so defiantly expressed some eight decades ago has not been diminished with time, nor can his grasp of the realities of the Aboriginal situation be at all underestimated. Even when read today, his letters and petitions

are, in every sense, modern in tone and as relevant as the day he penned them. He declared that Aboriginal people's rights regarding occupation and land ownership over-rode all others. He bluntly refused any notion of inferiority for Aboriginal people. The New South Wales Government and its agencies, which confronted the AAPA and its operations with force and aggression, did not intimidate him. There was a concerted official attempt to stamp out the flickering flame of hope that the AAPA had generated among Aboriginal communities. The methods employed against the AAPA included direct harassment of its office bearers, attempts to discredit their reputations, and a covert bid to encourage division from within the ranks of the AAPA's structure. The attempt to cause division and fracture from within failed, though as a method it has been used against Aboriginal communities and organisations in the decades that followed.

But the AAPA abruptly ceased public operation in 1928. Evidence suggests the AAPA was hounded and harassed out of existence by the New South Wales police, acting on behalf of the Aborigines Protection Board.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the head of NSW Police was also chair of the Aborigines Protection Board!

Tragically, Maynard was severely injured in what has been reported as a work-related accident. His injuries were so severe that he spent twelve months in and out of hospital. His leg was amputated and, thereafter, he was incapacitated. He endured a prolonged battle with illness from which he never recovered. He died in 1946.

The AAPA was not just the first Aboriginal political movement in Australia, it was also the most contemporary in its philosophy and internationalist in its outlook. Its demands for Aboriginal land for Aboriginal people and for the ending of child removal, and its efforts to enfranchise the Aboriginal population of New South Wales, are as relevant today as they were in the 1920s. But the Goliath in this battle — the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board — was a determined enemy. In *Fight for Liberty and Freedom* I shall show how the AAPA and its supporters challenged the Board, and the lengths the Board went to defeat its opponent. I shall also reveal the AAPA's links to other Black movements internationally through the Sydney waterfront and the subsequent influential inspiration of that contact on Aboriginal political mobilisation and directive.