

**William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to Sir John Harris, Secretary, Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, 22 December 1937, Papers of the Anti-Slavery Society, Weston Library, Oxford University, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22, G379**

In your article on "The Tragedy and Romance of the Australian Natives" of October 1937, there is a certain element of optimism which is bound to mislead those who are not in the position to know the true state of affairs. *TRAGEDY*, yes, a thousand times more than has ever been told, but *ROMANCE*, no, not for my people, not since the white man has set foot on our shores.

You say that "a remarkable change has taken place in the attitude of Australian Public Opinion and the Australian Governments toward the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent. "It would be difficult", you further state, "to find another instance of such a rapid rise of a primitive people, from a position of inferiority, neglect and contempt to one of real national concern".

No one more than myself could desire so ardently that things were as you think they are. How I wish it were as you say. Then, the pretty picture which adorns the front page of your paper would be justified and true.

How glad and grateful my people are for the few white friends who, like you, Dear Sir John, are genuinely interested in our cause and who are actually working on our behalf, I cannot find words to tell. But, as regards the Public, as a whole, even here at Home, so to say, in Australia, there is ignorance, indifference, and even the same old superiority complex of the white man toward the colored—for, as you must know, the White Australia policy excludes us, the aborigines of this continent.

This "striking change", you continue, has been effected chiefly because, at long last, the real merits and capacities of the aborigines has been brought home to the knowledge and conscience of the Australian people". Alas, this is not so. With very few exceptions, the white people here have neither the knowledge nor the conscience which you have in mind. On the contrary, our friends among the white Australians and our own educated aborigines, all agree that the prevalent attitude among those who at all take an interest in us is that the blackfellow is a "low, almost sub human creature, and the sooner he dies out the better". And this is shown in practice by the way in which the blackman is treated: killing of aboriginals by constables and other white men is still a very frequent occurrence: the taking away of hunting grounds and replacing the people by bullocks to fatten on these grounds, thus forcing the aboriginals to die in the barren desert, is still practiced: the disgraceful and shameful treatment of our girls by the white men is still as prevalent as ever, and even our rulers seem to support such behaviour, as it appears, for instance, from such parliamentary debates as reported in Hansard No. 11 of last year in Western Australia and the material conditions of life on Government Mission stations are such as no white man would tolerate for his own people, aside from the indignity of segregation.

Our Prime Minister tells us that he and his cabinet are much concerned about the aboriginals, but the problem is to know how exactly to help us. Surely that is no problem, for it is plain that we need food, shelter, education, civilisation, and, finally, complete emancipation. We do not want policemen to rule over us and cattlemen to

“civilise” us. We need and want the cooperation of the educated, kindly and sympathetic white people, backed by the financial power of the Federal Government, to bring education, culture and industry to my people so that we may become partners in the work of our country—the Commonwealth of Australia. And I maintain that my people have the ability, the intelligence and the unspoiled native power, if given the opportunity and the necessary start off, to add their quota to the work of the World on a scale not inferior to that of the average white man. The time is long past due to right the wrongs perpetrated against my people, and no government could act speedily enough in making real their promises of long standing.

In conclusion, let me assure you that I have addressed these remarks to you in the interests of justice and truth and I am confident that you will accept them in the same spirit.

P. S. This is a copy of an open letter to the Times, London, which, I hope may be published in true explanation of the state of affairs here and in appreciation of the good work of your society on our behalf.