

24. Grampa's Ways

Surviving the Conflict

Grampa's life covered two periods of intense conflict at Cummeragunga. In the period from 1908 to 1922, Cummera people were in open rebellion as first their land and then many of their children were taken away. Despite Grampa taking a principled stand at all times, trying to work out the best course for fairness and justice, the Aborigines Protection Board blamed him for the troubles. The Board and its managers were open about their fears that Grampa's skill as a teacher was supporting Aboriginal people to speak up for themselves and express themselves clearly in official letters. The mission manager George Harris tried over a ten-year period to have Grampa removed, and the APB tried to sack him twice and also harassed his family. Eventually Grampa was left with no alternative but to resign, which he did in 1922.

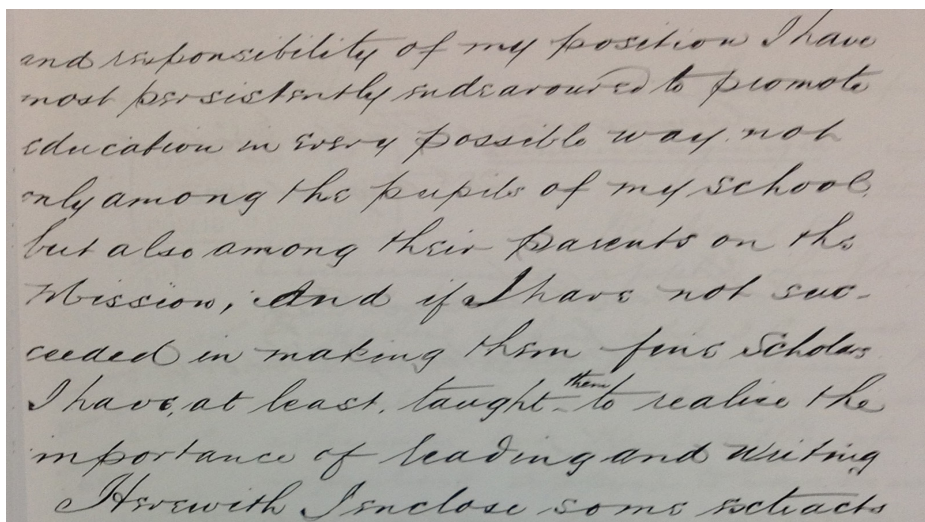
The effect of his teaching lasted much longer than his employment.

The Leaders

The second major period of open conflict at Cummera occurred in the late 1930s. The Aboriginal people who were pivotal in the Walk-off of 1939 were also heavily involved with the Aboriginal civil rights movement and had earlier participated in the Day of Mourning in 1938, and the Petition to the King (c. 1935) – and they were Grampa's students. Uncle William Cooper, Grampa's brother-in-law, had been a regular participant in Grampa's Scholars Hut lessons for adults. Uncle William stayed in close contact with Grampa and he was part of the group that used to gather in Grampa's home. The younger activists like Aunty Margaret Tucker, Uncle Shady (Grampa's son), Pastor Doug Nicholls, Uncle Bill Onus and George and Jack Patten had all been children in Grampa's classrooms. There, Grampa had encouraged the passions they all later demonstrated in their campaigns for civil, land and family rights and the skills of 'leading and writing' that Grampa set out to impart to his students. He specifically wrote about this in his letter to Chief Inspector Thomas Pearson on 28 August 1891.

When our Yorta Yorta leaders stepped onto the political stage from the 1920s and '30s onwards they were already well equipped in the skills of writing formal letters, demonstrating strong leadership and public speaking; they also had a sound knowledge of the Australian political system. And there are those who quietly, in their own home, put pen to paper, writing to newspapers to

voice their concerns about the plight of our people, such as my father-in-law Ronald Morgan. There is only one place they could have got such a strong and well rounded foundation in those changing times when Aboriginal education was so limiting – the Scholars Hut. Even the authorities knew that; that is why they saw Grampa as such a threat; and that is why they sought to curtail his influence.



The part portion of 'leading and writing' letter, 28 August 1891.

Source: Koori Heritage Trust.

From the evidence gathered there is no doubt in my mind that after Grampa's retirement in 1922 he continued to work behind the scenes educating, advising, mentoring, and devising strategies to achieve the recognition and equity our people deserved and desired; his work was instrumental for our leaders on the political scene.

Quietly Leaving His Mark

Because Grampa has always been described as a self-effacing man – modest, kind and gentle – it would not be in his nature to take credit for, or to be a visible part of, an issue that was quintessentially Aboriginal. However, the evidence speaks for itself; throughout this book it has been shown time and again that Grampa's influence on the Cummera community was profound in so many ways.

The fact that Grampa was originally from Mauritius matters little. He became part of our Aboriginal community of Maloga and Cummeragunga on the Murray River through marriage and by his unceasing determination to better the lives of our people – who were his people too.

ABORIGINES MEET, MOURN WHILE WHITE-MAN NATION CELEBRATES

THE following pictures, the press was told, "Could not be got." White-man photographers and reporters were politely refused admission to the meeting. MAN, only, made the meeting, got pictures. On January 26, 1938, while Australia celebrated, New South Wales aborigines mourned the coming of the white man, passed resolution of protest after all-day indignation-debate, asked full citizens rights. Protested Organising Secretary Ferguson, "We have been 'protected' for 150 years, and look what has become of us." Added Fitzroy footballer Douglas Nicholls, "We are not chickens, we are eagles."



SECTION OF ABORIGINAL MEETING in Australian Hall, Sydney, organised by Aborigines' Progressive Association mourners.

Article from Man magazine, 1938. Some of Grampa's students heavily involved in the Aborigines Conference, Day of Mourning and the Petition to the King, asking for better conditions and citizenship rights for Aboriginal Australians. These photos include Aunty Marg Tucker, Pastor Doug Nicholls, Uncle William Cooper, and Uncle Jack Patten, 1938.

Source: AIATSIS and State Library of NSW.

The legacy of his work continues to be apparent today in the descendants of the many students that he taught long ago. He really was a remarkable man who taught and inspired a generation of Aboriginal leaders and we still talk about him today, with our community members still referring to him as 'Grampa James'. His memory still shines strongly for our Yorta Yorta people, his descendants and even further afield.

Grampa knew very well that the power of the pen was mightier than the sword, and he encouraged his students and the community to fight for their rights through 'leading and writing' and instilling in them the confidence to do so.

Grampa was a peaceful man and so were our people; there was no violence or aggression in his activism; the protests of the 1930s were peaceful but forceful – William Cooper's writings and letters were prolific, as were those of Jack Patten. Grampa stoked the fire of rebellion behind the scenes, but was never seen brandishing a torch. This was why Grampa was considered such a danger; it was known that he was influencing the agitation of the day and this is what led the APB to instigate his removal from Cummera in 1922.

The 'Calling'

It is apparent that Grampa was not driven by material gain; if he had been, he would have chosen an easier life and stayed with his friend Charles Crosby Esquire and taken on a position suited to his intelligence and skills within that international company. There is no doubt that Grampa could have stepped easily into a life with far more monetary reward, if he was so inclined. But, as he told his daughter, Nanny Pris, about the day he met the Maloga Revival Group at Brighton Beach: 'God spoke to me that day!'

Grampa said it was his calling to return to Maloga with the Revival Group and work with and for our people and he never seemed to look back. In fact that was Grampa's 'way'. He always said to his children: 'We are here now. Forget about the past! That's in the past!' He took hold of his new life, new adventure, new calling, and new challenge and ran with it. This led to many of his children living with the same attitude about leaving the past in the past, which is partly why locating his family history has been so challenging.

When Grampa started working as a teacher on Maloga, he would have recognised the difficulty of working with such a deeply oppressed people, in a community school that was so poorly resourced and where buildings were of a terrible standard. Grampa started writing to authorities shortly after his arrival and never stopped until he retired; constantly seeking school supplies, renovations to both the school and his home to bring them up to the standard he knew was enjoyed at other schools in the district, and so much more. Although the APB and NSW Education Department were impossibly slow to act, he was undaunted by the fact that for years he had to purchase supplies from his own 'purse', while the school and his own home collapsed around him, affecting the health and wellbeing of his students, his staff, his family and himself.

He was called upon to justify his actions and the behaviour of his students on many occasions. It is apparent from the large collection of letters we now

have in our possession that his life was difficult both professionally and socially. However, in 41 years he never once surrendered to the physical, psychological and emotional challenges. In fact, time and again, he wrote to authorities asking to be allowed to stay on in his position, demonstrating his love and commitment to our community.

The Good Reports

Regardless of how Grampa's career ended up – with blame, fear, complaints and his forced resignation – there were many years where the authorities were quite happy with his work. The school inspectors were regularly visiting and assessing the performance of both Grampa and his school. In 1903, it was noted that his 'influence for good permeates the whole school'. In 1908, following an investigation into the friction between George Harris and Grampa, a report stated that: 'The Cummeragunga School is a well managed one ... Mr James and his daughter [Aunty Miriam] are earnest, capable and enthusiastic teachers. They are thoroughly in sympathy with the whole of the coloured parents and children and their influence is a good one'. Even in 1908, the year after the farm blocks started being taken away from our Aboriginal men, and life wasn't good for our people, reports about Grampa's teaching were still very positive – and then there's the numerous times that Grampa was honored by the community around him, as outlined earlier in this book. But, sadly, it was all downhill from there.

Grampa's Style

We have often been asked what it was that made Grampa such a unique and wonderful teacher: what was his teaching style? After researching Grampa for so many years, learning about his background and experience and the rich cultural background from which he came, it is clear that Grampa had developed the incredible skill of instilling in Aboriginal children the hunger for learning which they took into their adult years and passed onto their children. We can see it through the descendants of his students today. But let's explore this a little more deeply.

Learnings from India

What skills might Grampa have learnt from India through his father? First of all let's think back to the India that Grandfather Peersahib would have left, and how some of the learning from that period may have filtered down to Grampa and his approach to Aboriginal education on our missions. Grandfather Peersahib

was educated in a Christian school in Madras but was also steeped in the strong disciplined learnings of Islam. From this he developed a genuine interest in teaching, seen through his school-monitoring role in Madras, and connections to Christianity in both India and Mauritius.

The British Raj took formal control of India in 1858 just four years after Grandfather Peersahib left Madras for Mauritius. Doubtless, he would have experienced the lead up to the Mutiny which was followed by the establishment of the Raj and total colonial control of India. Although he was employed as a school monitor in Madras, in 1854 he was suddenly thrust into the life of an indentured labourer. Indentured labourers were lured by the 'promise' of a better life, so we can assume that Grandfather Peersahib 'chose' to leave his life in Madras for Mauritius. Once in Mauritius, his quick and firm connection to Bishop Ryan and the Anglican Church through catechism gave him the opportunity to build a life as a 'free' man and move away from labouring, eventually supporting those who remained indentured. We imagine him equipping indentured labourers with the skills, knowledge and the belief in themselves that they needed to survive in a white man's world, just as his son went on to do for our people here in Australia.

Grampa was a highly intelligent man. He was born and raised in Mauritius around the time of the struggles in colonial India so no doubt he would have learnt much about the ways in which the people of India stood up against the oppression of the British. He also would have learnt of his father's transformation from an indentured 'unfree' life, to a wealthy interpreter owning seven properties across Mauritius.

Grampa grew up in a time in Mauritius when adults would have sat around in the evening discussing politics and other pertinent issues. It seems likely that this would have been a key part of his own 'learning' – not to mention the influence of his parents and their family as Christians, missionaries and catechists. He then recreated the same type of environment for learning in our mission schools and in the Scholars Hut; a combination of learning and Christian faith. Grampa would have been the pivotal figure as men gathered around in the dark of night, by candlelight to learn about the importance of leading and writing; to read and discuss national and world issues together, just as the women would have experienced in their Scholars Hut with Miss Affleck and others.

Uncle Shadrach James

In a letter from Uncle Shady to Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1945, he makes strong statements about the need for 'Native Representation' in the Federal House of Representatives, and likens our Aboriginal situation in Australia to an indigenous group in India:

Aborigines are no longer a back number but are alive to the possibilities which confront them in these modern times and that was demonstrated in the fact they they played their part in this great enterprise the struggle for freedom and justice. They fought and died with their comrades. There must be a beginning, and one is only to be reminded of the "Namasudra" people of India who astounded the aristocratic Brahmins with their intelligence. I say most emphatically that we do possess those combative qualities which enable us to hold our own in the stern contest of civilization. I have discovered amongst our statesmen and politicians a very great failure to legislate for the betterment and preservation of our race.

These strong words show that Uncle Shady had a good knowledge of world politics, the history of different groups in India and their struggle against their oppressors. This suggests that Grampa used examples of other oppressed peoples to inspire his students in the Scholars Hut to overcome life's struggles, hence creating politically savvy leaders of the future.



Some of our political leaders including Uncle Shady James on the far left, Uncle William Cooper centre with white moustache, and Uncle Pastor Doug Nicholls to the far right.

Learnings from Mauritius

Grampa started teaching in Mauritius from the age of 14, as suggested by Auntie Priscilla Thomas, so, it is no wonder that he developed a genuine interest in teaching Aboriginal children and young adults, just as his father was doing for Indian people/children in Mauritius.

Grampa would have recognised the many parallels that existed within the British colonies of India, Mauritius and Australia, and the atrocities that occurred there for the colonised peoples. We are certain that he would have felt much empathy and sympathy for our people and thought long and hard about the key learnings from India and Mauritius that might be helpful to Aboriginal people in the late 1800s to early 1900s.

His life in Mauritius provided him with a strong basis for his future role as a teacher of education and the Christian faith, just as his father did.

Learnings from Our Aboriginal People

I have no doubt that whilst our people learnt from Grampa, he also learnt from them. Whether at the request of R.H. Matthews (anthropologist) for more information about Aboriginal culture, or for his own personal interest, he was forever learning about our ways, practices, traditions, connection to country and people, medical and surgical practices, language, tribes and clans, marriage customs and lore.

This type of knowledge would have been invaluable to Grampa in the classroom and on the mission, in understanding us as a people and therefore understanding our learning styles, interests and tribal challenges. It was also a way to support our people to keep their traditions such as bush medicines alive.

A Powerful Combination

Grampa understood that one of the most important and powerful means of addressing the social imbalance that colonisation, dispossession, and oppression brought was through systematic and rigorous education. With all of his knowledge and experience behind him, he was able to provide a unique education to Aboriginal people on Maloga and Cummeragunga Missions; a standard of education second to none in Australia; one that involved all the important topics of life and survival in that day and age.

For the Love of Grampa

Our men and women looked to Grampa for guidance, wisdom, knowledge and support. Whether for medical advice, or otherwise, he was the one they turned to. He was family, friend and confidante. He listened to our people and fought for our rights day in, day out – and he took the time to get to know our people and became the one most consistent figure in their lives as the numerous teaching assistants and mission managers came and went. He loved our people and we loved him with everyone calling him ‘Grampa James’ – even now, in 2014, 68 years after his death we all remember ‘Grampa James’.

Respecting the Teacher

As children grew up around their parents and witnessed the great respect and admiration their parents had for Grampa, they learnt to do the same. Once they entered his classroom, this respect made for a positive and nurturing learning environment – instilling pride and self confidence: they knew that Grampa believed in them.

When Grampa spoke, the children listened because of that great respect passed down from their parents. He gently and respectfully taught Aboriginal children in a way that they could relate to; in 1891 it was noted that he sought ‘to make their work in school a pleasure rather than a task’. Grampa was very good at identifying Aboriginal people’s ways of learning, and catered directly for our specific learning needs – something the education system of Australia could learn from today. He taught with real Aboriginal pedagogy.

Grampa's Love

It is well known that at Cummeragunga Mission Grampa gave all children in his classroom equal time and support. He taught the white children just as he taught our children, and they *all* (black and white) called him ‘Grampa’ in the classroom and out. It was nothing for him to take them up in his strong arms and give them a big cuddle at any given moment, so they felt loved and valued. This is why so many students attended his school over the 41 years he was at Maloga and Cummera. And this is why the Aboriginal community of Cummeragunga and the broader community of Barmah and surrounding district respected, loved and honoured him on numerous occasions.

He really was a man of the whole community, and we have shown throughout this book, many examples of when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have given thanks to Grampa for the solid education he provided, leading to their good careers as adults. Daniel and Janet Matthews’ son Reverend J.K. Matthews paid tribute to Grampa’s teaching following his death in 1946, describing him

as 'his "earliest teacher" who laid the truest and finest foundation ... a teacher unsurpassed anywhere'. (See the full text of Matthews' tribute to Grampa in Appendix 2.)

A White Teacher, White School

George Harris, the mission manager, pushed for a white teacher at Cummera in 1908 because there were white students attending the school. In 1910, Harris, Wilkinson and friends were crying out for a separate school for white children on the grounds of the 'unfitness of the school to receive white children, the moral atmosphere thereof being vitiated (lessened in quality) by the attendance of such a large number of Aboriginal children'. Grampa fought for the white children to remain in his classroom, and so they did.

Robynne: It's interesting to see these men of the day taking such a stand against their children being outnumbered in the classroom by Aboriginal children. This makes me think about Aboriginal children today, where the ratios are completely reversed. At least in those days at Cummeragunga they had a teacher who was there for ALL his students – a loving and protective grandfather figure. There are so many cases today here in Australia, where a child is the only Aboriginal child in a school and expected to survive the education system amidst many challenges including racism and culturally ineffective teaching styles. Who is watching out for them today, just as Grampa watched out for the small number of white kids in his school?

His Retirement

Needless to say, Grampa's qualities were limitless; he was a Grampa to all his students and, as you can imagine, it would have been fantastic to have your Grampa in the classroom as headmaster and teacher, passing on his wisdom, knowledge, experience and doing it all with great respect. His was a classroom where students were inspired; a place where scholars, politicians, community leaders and athletes were made; a place where new generations were born; a place where Aboriginal students came to believe that they really were '*as good as white man!*'; a place where all students, black and white, stood together, side by side, learning, growing and believing that they could be anything they set out to be.

Educators have firmly established through research the importance of the role of the teacher in a child's education. This factor has been stressed over and over again by educators involved in Aboriginal education. Contemporary Aboriginal educators such as Chris Sarra are continuously reiterating that the teacher who believes in the child and in his or her potential to achieve whatever he or she believes in, can then lay the foundation to a life of learning and success.

For those of you out there charged with the education of our Aboriginal children today – our leaders of tomorrow – think about my Grampa, and what he achieved with what little resources he had, in a tiny school room, and even smaller Scholars Hut, for the education of a greatly oppressed people, with insurmountable challenges around him. Then think about what you can achieve today with the amazing array of resources you have at your disposal.