

## Chapter 9

# Fred Maynard and Marcus Garvey: Storming the urban space

John Maynard

Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle

**Abstract:** *This chapter seeks to examine the impact of Australian Aboriginal and African-American political revolt in the early decades of the twentieth century in relation to the city and urban space. In the United States the aftermath of the civil war witnessed a mass movement of black people from the rural environment to the city in search of better opportunities. These dreams of a better life were largely unfulfilled. Although not on a similar scale, the movement of Aboriginal people to the city in the early decades of the twentieth century allowed them to escape from the clutches of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board. It also, importantly, provided opportunities for contact with international black visitors and with the political manifestos and ideology they carried with them. Fred Maynard in Australia and Marcus Garvey in the United States both utilised the press and city space to challenge and inform the wider public of the intolerable disadvantage, racism, prejudice and oppression that confronted their peoples.*

### Introduction

The move to urban spaces both in the United States and Australia provided the platform that witnessed the rise of black leaders like Garvey and Maynard. Both were articulate, eloquent and powerful speakers. Garvey is credited with establishing the biggest black movement ever assembled in the United States, with millions of followers worldwide at its height. Garvey's ability to tap into grassroots issues and the mindset of many oppressed groups was undoubtedly his greatest triumph. His message of racial pride, cultural pride, pride in history and connection to country and place of birth resonated powerfully with many groups, including Aboriginal people in Australia. Garvey recognised the moment and sent forth a message of encouragement:

## Exploring urban identities and histories

Everywhere the Blackman is beginning to do his own thinking, to demand more participation in his own government, more economic justice, and better living conditions. The Universal Negro Improvement Association during the past five years has blazed the trail for him, and he is following the trail. We do not think he will turn back. He has nothing to lose and everything to gain by pushing forward, whatever the obstacles he may encounter. (*Negro World*, 20 September 1924)

The Garvey movement established its central base in Harlem, New York. Author Clare Corbould (2009:6–7), in her recent book *Becoming African Americans*, stated that:

Black public life transformed partly because of a steady movement of black Americans to towns and even bigger cities. This great migration, as it has come to be known, brought to life black metropolises that gave new feelings of militancy a permanent address. Where just under twenty percent of black Americans lived in urban areas in 1890, by 1920 the figure was thirty four percent. Migrants contributed to new political organisations that gave voice to black Americans' growing discontent.

Harlem at this time was already becoming the centre of the black universe, the virtual black capital of the world. It was, in those first decades of the twentieth century, a vibrant, cosmopolitan place, bubbling over with political, cultural and religious activity. It was like a magnet for black radicals of all types and a large number of outstanding black creative artists (Martin 1983:41). Harlem was unquestionably the most highly politicised black community on the planet.

Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association was able to tap into this bubbling pot of rebellion like no other before or since. In 1920 Garvey held the First International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World at Madison Square Garden in New York and more than 25 000 people from around the globe filled the arena and spilled out into the streets. The opening of the convention was preceded by a parade: 'All along 7th Avenue, crowds jostled for the best view of the spectacular procession weaving through Harlem' (Grant 2008:242). At the opening of the convention Garvey's powerful words echoed through the great hall: 'We are assembled here tonight as the descendants of a suffering people and we are determined to suffer no longer' (Grant 2008:246).

There were differences of interpretation of the black and white space within the city. As an example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which featured WEB Du Bois, had its offices in the white part of the city, with a primarily white board and many white office workers. It could not connect with the heart and soul of the black experience on the street in the way that Garvey could and did. On visiting Du Bois in the offices of the NAACP, Garvey

was 'dumbfounded' to find that it was impossible to tell whether one was in a white office or that of a black protest organisation: 'There was no representation of the race that anyone could recognize' (Levine 1993:118). Garvey and Du Bois developed a deep mistrust and dislike of one another. Garvey humorously tagged the NAACP as the National Advancement Association of 'Certain' People (Martin 1976:273–4). As Mary G Rolinson (2007) illustrates in her recent study, *Grassroots Garveyism*, it was Garvey's ability to reach out to the rural black experience that galvanised his massive support. He was prepared to travel with his message from the urban city space to the deep-south and other rural areas across the United States where blacks were experiencing savage disadvantages. Virginia Collins, a Louisiana Garveyite, expressed the emotion that Garvey was able to generate:

He spoke from his soul...and ah, Garvey spoke the words that you thought you was speaking yourself...They were in your thoughts, in your mind, in your brains, but still you did not speak them the way Garvey spoke them. And it...ah, it was in one accord. It was just like everyone had one mind. (Rolinson 2007:24)

In looking at the broad appeal that connected the Garveyism of the city centre with the rural oppressed, Rolinson (2007:2) observes, 'What has remained obscured, though it is in many ways more significant, is that this organization's program enjoyed broad popularity in the South because it also embodied the practical and spiritual aspirations of rural farmers. Garvey recognized this fact...'

In Sydney the newly formed Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) also tapped into growing grassroots rural discontentment. It held its first conference at St David's Church and Hall in Surry Hills in April 1925. More than 200 Aboriginal people attended this inaugural Aboriginal civil rights convention, many having travelled great distance from across the state. President Fred Maynard delivered an inspiring inaugural address:

Brothers and sisters, we have much business to transact so we will get right down to it. We aim at the spiritual, political, industrial and social. We want to work out our own destiny. Our people have not had the courage to stand together in the past, but now we are united, and are determined to work for the preservation for all of those interests which are near and dear to us. (*Daily Guardian*, 7 May 1925, p.1; see also Maynard 2007:53–4)

Like Garvey, Fred Maynard also travelled widely, listening to the voice of Aboriginal protest and offering inspiration and hope. In early 1925 the Sydney press reported that Maynard had returned to the city after visiting some remote Aboriginal centres, where he was '[amazed] to see the interest the people are taking in this movement' (*Voice of the North*, 10 August 1925, p.13). The AAPA was far more sophisticated and organised

than many have later credited. It opened its own offices in Crown Street, Sydney, in 1925, assisted in establishing a home for Aboriginal girls who had run away from white employers, became an officially registered company with the Registrar General (despite severe opposition from the Protection Board) and established 13 branches across the state with an active membership of more than 600 Aboriginal members. The AAPA also held four annual conferences in Sydney, Kempsey, Grafton and Lismore, where papers were written and delivered by Aboriginal people on issues including housing, education, health, employment, land and children — issues that remain on the agenda some 85 years later. The AAPA had a ready base of followers eager to align themselves with this new movement. Salt Pan Creek on the Georges River in southern Sydney, for example, was a place of growing Aboriginal political discontent. Cadzow and Goodall (2009:143) note that:

Important though Maynard and his fellow north coast countrymen were, there is a need also to understand better the city Aboriginal support which buoyed the movement from its earliest days. These urban networks drew on the rural links already well established in the Sydney communities to circulate news of the new movement and to alert the AAPA spokespeople to the conflicts occurring in rural areas outside their own north coast networks.

The AAPA leadership was readily given the opportunity to speak politics in places like Salt Pan Creek and La Perouse, to large gatherings of supportive and encouraging Aboriginal people who were sick and tired of government negligence and inability to listen to Aboriginal grievances. Interviews with Jacko Campbell and Ted Thomas revealed: ‘You’d see them old fellas sittin’ around in a ring, when there was anything to be done...They were well educated! They could talk on politics!’ (Cadzow and Goodall 2009:149).

Marcus Garvey, in a 1922 paper delivered in New York, forcefully declared the intentions of the new Blackman on the city street:

We represent a new line of thought among Negroes. Whether you call it advanced thought or reactionary thought, I do not care. If it is reactionary for people to seek independence in government, then we are reactionary. If it is advanced thought for people to seek liberty and freedom, then we represent the advanced school of thought among the Negroes of this country. We of the U.N.I.A. [Universal Negro Improvement Association] believe that what is good for the other fellow is good for us. If government is something that is worthwhile; if government is something that is applicable and helpful and protective to others, then we also want to experiment in government. We do not mean a government that will make us citizens without rights or subjects without consideration.

We mean the kind of government that will place our race in control. (Garvey 1970:164)

The city offered Aboriginal people an opportunity to be in a space with a degree of freedom, away from the confines and control of the Protection Board. In the urban space they were able to meet, mobilise and talk up an agenda of political, social, historical and economic change and it was unquestionably the movement of Aboriginal people to the city that generated this first organised, united Aboriginal movement in the 1920s. In a similar fashion to Garvey in the United States, it was also the experience and knowledge of what was happening in the rural and remote areas of the country that triggered their fighting response. They were fighting for land. They were fighting to stop the practice of Aboriginal kids being removed from their families and they were fighting in defence of a distinct Aboriginal cultural identity. All of these issues were connected to the rural areas and the AAPA had established an effective grassroots community network that fed information to its central offices which were used to expose and embarrass the Protection Board in the city press.

Aboriginal people in much larger numbers than have previously been imagined were living in Sydney prior to the 1930s in areas like Redfern, Woolloomooloo, Surry Hills and Chullora. They were working on the docks and railways, areas of opportunity that had arisen in the wake of the First World War. Their influence and contacts with trade union members and the connections they made on the wharves, particularly with visiting African-Americans, West Indians and Africans, were the foundation for their political strategy. Through discussions with these international associates many Aboriginal people were exposed to an ideology that was already in progress overseas. They realised they were not alone and that the racism and prejudice and oppression they were fighting in Australia was in fact a global battle and they needed a global strategy to tackle it.

Despite the urban space offering a degree of freedom, they were not completely away from the clutches of the Board; the AAPA and its leadership were under constant police surveillance and harassment. They were even under the scrutiny of a Crown solicitor acting, unsuccessfully, for the Board to find a legal way to shut down the organisation's activities.

Incredibly, with both Garvey in the United States and Maynard in Australia, by the mid-1930s both leaders and their movements were but fading memories. Garvey was a target for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and he was convicted and jailed on trumped-up mail fraud charges. Eventually, as a West Indian, he was deported in 1927 and was never allowed to return to the United States. Maynard and the AAPA in Australia were hounded out of existence by the police acting for the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board.

The demise of the AAPA in Australia also meant the organisation's erasure from Australian history and memory. Coupled with the systematic policy of exiling

Aboriginal people from the wider population, this erasure affected a wider white Australia's memory of an Aboriginal urban presence both before and after the Second World War. As a result Aboriginal people were less visible and vocal in the urban space, an effect exacerbated by the rising importance of anthropologists like AP Elkin in the 1920s. These new authorities directed not only the academic gaze but also government focus to the far north — where the 'real' blacks were. Such ideas were undoubtedly responsible for comments made by noted historians, such as a comment by FW Wood in the 1950s that 'nearly all the Aborigines live in the tropical north, for those of the south have died out since the white man's invasion...many people have lived for years in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide without seeing a native' (Wood 1957:263). Ernest Scott (1964:191) similarly stated with conviction that in the southern states of New South Wales and Victoria 'the black population is fading out of existence very rapidly, and within the present generation will probably cease to exist'. It would not be until the 1960s that a large-scale Aboriginal vocal political movement would again mobilise and voice discontent in the urban space.

In conclusion, some historians continue to minimise the impact of early urban black leaders like Fred Maynard and Marcus Garvey in the sphere of political protest rather than to recognise that these movements were the forerunner to all that came after, both in Australia and the United States. If we understand that the AAPA was a strong influence on Aboriginal activists for decades afterwards, we will recognise that the organisation was not just an aberration or short blip on the radar but an enduring movement which left a lasting legacy. One important consideration is that Maynard and the AAPA largely existed outside the view, recognition and influence of the wider white populace. Their momentum remained closely tied and connected to the grassroots Aboriginal community. This was pivotal in their success but also accounted for their eventual historical oblivion. The urban setting had provided a space to voice opposition to the policies of disadvantage that were savagely impacting on the majority of Aboriginal people in the rural sector. Today the memory of both the AAPA and the Universal Negro Improvement Association remains to inspire future generations and Garvey prophesised that the memory and impact of his message would remain long after his demise: 'Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for with God's grace, I shall come' (Levine 1993:124).

## References

- Cadzow, Allison and Heather Goodall 2009 *Rivers and Resilience*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Corbould, Clare 2009 *Becoming African Americans*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.
- Garvey, Marcus 1970 'Philosophy and opinions' in G Ducas, CL Van Doren and CE Lincoln (eds), *Great Documents in Black American History*, Praeger, New York.
- Grant, Colin 2008 *Negro with a Hat — The rise and fall of Marcus Garvey*, Jonathan Cape, London.

- Levine, Lawrence 1993 *The Unpredictable Past*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Martin, Tony 1976 *Race First*, Majority Press, Massachusetts.
- 1983 *Marcus Garvey, Hero*, Majority Press, Massachusetts.
- Maynard, John 2007 *Fight for Liberty and Freedom*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Rolinson, Mary 2007 *Grassroots Garveyism*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Scott, Ernest 1964 *A Short History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Wood, FLW 1957 *A Concise History of Australia*, Dymocks, Sydney.