

1. Personal and political awakenings, 1938–57

I am a third-generation Australian of English–Scottish descent but I was 35 years old before I met an Aboriginal Australian. Looking back over the 45 years since that first encounter it does seem extraordinary, yet even in the new millenium I'd say it is true that most white Australians meet Aboriginal people rarely, if at all. Do we deliberately not see Indigenous Australians because of the inherited guilt we feel about the events of 1788 and later? Do we not go out of our way to make friends with them because they are 'different'? Are we not moved by the fact that even in 2004 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still the most disadvantaged of all Australians? Or are we just so concerned with our own battles for survival, wellbeing and advancement that we have no resources left to assist our fellow social warriors?

I'd say my family was fairly typical of most Australians in the 1920s. My father was born in Riverton, South Australia, a country town co-founded by Horners who arrived there from Yorkshire in the 1850s. Dad's first job was as a messenger boy for the Australian Post Office. His father was the railway stationmaster. Right from the beginning, my father was determined to do well. In his early working life he took an internal exam just about every year so he would rise in the ranks. By the time he retired in 1949 he was the acting deputy director for New South Wales.

My mother's people were from Dunfermline, near Edinburgh. Her maiden name was Templeman. Her family migrated to Victoria, which is where my parents met after my father had been transferred from South Australia to Victoria. They were married in 1914. They were both very fond of choral singing. My father was a good bass singer and my mother, a well-trained musician, would accompany him on the

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piano. My father had been active in the Anglican Church in Adelaide and also in a debating club he'd joined when he was younger. Like many Australians at that time, I think, they were interested in musical cultures and a better education for children.

My father was transferred to New South Wales in 1930, when I was only seven, and my parents were determined that my two older brothers and I should go to a good school. We all secured places at the selective Sydney Boys High. After I got involved in Aboriginal affairs I was able to use that old boys' network time and again. The prominent campaigner for Aboriginal legal rights, Hal Wootten, AC, QC, was a student there, and so was the late Lionel Murphy, Australia's attorney-general in the Whitlam government and later a justice of the High Court. Lionel was a couple of grades below me, although we were the same age. I have to say, we learned little about Aboriginal affairs at the school back in the 1930s. On the other hand, we were encouraged to support the European refugee boys at the school and were taught about the evils of Hitler and racism.

Unfortunately, as a schoolboy I was often sick and off school for long periods of time. I had scarlet fever when I was at Randwick Primary School, and I think that was when I became almost completely deaf in my left ear. In my fourth year of high school I had a breakdown. I'd been working all hours at night trying to concentrate on studying for my exams and on the day of the exam my health broke down. As a result, I had to convalesce at home for eight months and had to leave school. The doctors said I would not be able to take the matriculation exams because of my poor health, so I could not enter Sydney University as I had intended. I loved to study, however, so I didn't give up the idea of further education. In 1940, I was accepted in the Art Department at the East Sydney Technical College. That was my first conscious life-changing experience.

After I left school I tried to find a number of different ways to learn about the world outside my own experience. Until I went to East Sydney Tech I did this mostly by reading books and getting involved in amateur theatre. There was a lot of amateur theatre in the years following the Depression because there were so many rooms in Sydney not being used and the authorities let the amateur theatre companies utilise the space. The books and plays I read were all very Euro-centric,

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written in French as well as English. While they raised my awareness of and interest in Europe at that time, in many ways those works did not have much bearing on my own life in Australia.

At the tech I learned to converse with people my own age about political and personal problems that affected us directly. We were well aware that eventually we would have to go to war. It was also at the tech that I had women friends for the first time. As one of three brothers I had known very few women other than my mother and my aunt. It was a great discovery and adventure. We'd meet in the coffee shops and express our ideas and talk about art as young people do. I was studying theatre design but I was also good at painting. It was the education I'd missed out on by not going on to university. It was also where I met Jean Cowtan, at a students fencing club. We joined the National Arts Students Club, forming a cultural committee of two.

In December 1941 I was posted to Bathurst as part of a student regiment of Sydney University. There I attended the Sunday Evensong choral services at Bathurst's Anglican Cathedral, and became a lifelong Christian, which disposed me towards listening to victims of injustice. A year later, when the Kokoda campaign was over, I was called up for the Royal Australian Engineers, stationed at Kapooka training ground, Wagga Wagga. Despite my poor health and hearing, I was accepted as a sapper and sent overseas. The troopship *SS Katoomba* sailed from Sydney and steered south-east for New Zealand, and then headed for Port Moresby, Papua, steering wide to avoid the Coral Sea. From there I was dispatched, via Townsville, to Merauke, a penal colony in Dutch New Guinea. There were a number of black American servicemen stationed in Townsville. Under the White Australia Policy they weren't allowed to go any further south.

At Merauke I was in the camouflage unit, and our task was to protect the Torres Strait from the Japanese. Merauke was a Dutch dependency, but as a huge swamp filled much of the land the Dutch could make little progress there. The residents included Malay political prisoners and some Chinese traders, all very interesting people. The friends I made there gave me the names and addresses of relatives who had settled in Brisbane, and when I returned to Australia I met up with a group of them in a Brisbane restaurant. Most of them were revolutionaries and followers of Sukarno in 1943. One man

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spoke five languages and was highly educated. These meetings with Malay residents and expatriates were a cross-cultural awakening for me. It's ironic that I had to go overseas to understand the dilemmas of a people under foreign rule.

I had been corresponding with Jean during this time and after the war ended we saw more of each other. We married in 1947. I'd gone back to the tech to complete my diploma under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme. I focused on oil painting at first but maintained my interest in theatre. Around that time I met Sydney John Kay, whose vision was to establish a national theatre in Australia. Through John I got involved with the Mercury Theatre, which was started by Allan Ashbolt, a theatre critic who later became an ABC journalist, and Peter Finch, the actor. When Peter left for England in 1949, some of his former students at Mercury Theatre, myself included, followed him there. Jean and I arrived in London in 1950 and spent three years in southern England. We both worked in repertory theatre, behind the scenes, and were paid as professionals. Jean got work at the box offices of about three theatres during that time and, while working in my day job as a stage designer and painter, I studied for the British Booksellers' Association Diploma.

During that post-war period people from different parts of the Empire began arriving in London: Indians, including Sikhs; Nigerians; and so on. It was at this time that India declared itself an independent republic. Most of the accommodation available had a sign in the window saying 'No Coloureds', which amazed us. We found a small room with a shared kitchen in a four-storey house with no such sign. It was there that Jean learned to make curry from an Indian neighbour. Our neighbours were from all over the Empire and we got to know them pretty well. I'd never experienced racial discrimination so closely before witnessing what our neighbours had to go through. Inspired to learn more, I used to spend time at Hyde Park Corner listening to speakers on radical politics. African and West Indian speakers talked of the politics of freedom and independence. This was the first time I'd heard 'coloured people' speak of this yearning for independence. They raised my awareness of the prejudices they suffered, such as receiving harsher sentences from the courts, or being bullied and treated with disrespect by their fellow workers and foremen in the factories.

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Under the Atlantic Charter of 1941, Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed on four freedoms. In the London of 1950, the Africans in particular took these very seriously, particularly the issue of colonial control by European nations. They spoke of *their* freedom, the freedom of people of African descent in both America and Africa, not European freedom. It was a West Indian who opened my eyes to the discrimination in the White Australia Policy. Friends asked us about Australian Aboriginal people, but we knew nothing. These were issues that were very much on my mind when Jean and I came back to Australia in 1953. Again, it was overseas, not in Australia, that my consciousness of racial issues was raised.

On our return to Australia I continued my interest in amateur theatre and got involved in the Waterside Workers Federation which, surprisingly perhaps, had a little theatre of its own, the New Theatre. I joined the Workers Education Association, taking part in regular monthly democratic meetings. Meanwhile, I got a job at the Law Book Company in Sydney, as jobs in the theatre were scarce, and in my spare time I read some of the books, particularly those on modern constitutional law. Our main clients were law firms and law students. One of our regular customers was Gough Whitlam, then a lawyer and, since 1952, Labor Member of the House of Representatives for Werriwa.

I was still working at the bookshop of the Law Book Company when I saw a poster advertising a meeting to be held at the Sydney Town Hall on 27 April 1957. It was to be a big public meeting, featuring both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers, and had been organised by the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship, formed the year before. The meeting would launch the first petition to change the Constitution and expose the state government's discriminatory laws.

The Fellowship was to become my introduction to Aboriginal people, and through it I learned about the many people who had been working since the 1920s and 1930s to improve conditions and the situation of Aboriginal people. My own account of the progress of Aboriginal rights in Australia would be incomplete without a summary of their work to this point.

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Aboriginal freedom fighters and the National Day of Mourning, 26 January 1938

In 1974 I published the first edition of my book *Bill Ferguson: Fighter for Aboriginal Freedom*. This told the story behind the formation of the Aborigines Progressive Association in 1937 and the National Day of Mourning held in Sydney on 26 January 1938, 150 years after the landing of the First Fleet.¹

Briefly, William ‘Bill’ Ferguson was a Wiradjuri who was heavily involved in the Australian Workers Union and the Australian Labor Party. His father was a Scot and his mother was Wiradjuri; with his brothers and sisters he grew up near Darlington Point in the Riverina district of western New South Wales. Bill became a shearer and never lived on an Aboriginal reserve, but he cared deeply about the poor conditions in which his mother’s people lived. As an Aboriginal man of mixed descent who did not live on a reserve, he was not under the control of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board and was therefore free to move around and agitate for better living and working conditions for Aboriginal people. From the 1920s, the board was his main target of criticism. Eventually, Bill realised he could not act alone; that if he were to take on major issues, such as the discrimination against Aboriginal people that was prevalent in New South Wales country towns, he would have to form an organisation. An Aboriginal man, Fred Maynard, had established the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association in 1924, but by 1928 this was no longer active. With the help of other Aboriginal activists, such as Jack Kinchela, John Patten and Pearl Gibbs, Bill Ferguson founded a new Aborigines Progressive Association in 1937. The APA publicly criticised the Aborigines Protection Board and called for social and economic equality for Aboriginal peoples, as well as full representation on the board. It also campaigned successfully for an official inquiry into the board’s activities.

Meanwhile, Ferguson had gained the support of William ‘Bill’ Cooper, the founder of the Australian Aborigines’ League (AAL) in Victoria. In 1935 Cooper had drafted a petition, signed by many Aboriginal people, to present to King George V, asking for Aboriginal representation in federal parliament and recognition of Aboriginal land rights. The Commonwealth had rejected this as unconstitutional

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as the King had no power in parliament, so instead Cooper appealed directly to the Federal Minister for the Interior for the establishment of a Department of Native Affairs. Nothing came of these petitions. Frustrated by the lack of action, Cooper called a meeting of Aboriginal leaders in November 1937 to seek support for a Day of Mourning to mark the 150th anniversary of the First Fleet's arrival at Sydney Cove. Cooper and Ferguson joined forces and began planning this together.

It was to be a very busy time for Ferguson. The Select Committee of Inquiry into the New South Wales APB was established in 1937 and, since Ferguson was a key witness and also cross-examined many other witnesses, this activity took up much of his time. The inquiry raised the interest of the Sydney press who, for the next three years at least, were willing to give the problems of Aboriginal people coverage in their daily newspapers. Ferguson may have been surprised to discover how many white people, individually or as members of groups, were supportive of the aspirations of Aboriginal Australians and of his efforts to instigate change for their betterment, and he made some useful contacts with these support groups.

Unfortunately the inquiry itself died from the politicians' indifference, much to Ferguson's disappointment. The last meeting was due to be held in early 1938, but the politicians and other key figures who were due to appear informed Ferguson they would not be there. The press promised that if Aboriginal leaders and their supporters appeared on the last day the matter would be given good publicity. Those who turned up were all Aboriginal supporters, including high-profile women from contemporary feminist clubs. When it became clear that the politicians would not show, Mrs P. A. Cameron, President of the Feminist Club, read a letter of protest, which she distributed to the press. The group then retired to the club's offices in Sydney's King Street, where Mrs Cameron chaired a meeting of all the women's associations and invited various people to put their points of view. Said Ferguson, 'We must educate the minds of the white people, otherwise the thrusting back of my people, which began 150 years ago, will continue — until they are swept off the earth.'

Mrs Cameron told the press: 'The word had been spread around women's organisations that if we turned up today we would be given

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a prime example of how our parliamentarians go about their work. There is no doubt about that prophecy. They didn't even attend the meeting. We are absolutely disgusted.'

* * *

Suddenly, many things started to happen at once in Aboriginal affairs. Cooper's long-delayed petition for political representation in federal parliament came before Cabinet early in January 1938. The Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, invited a deputation led by Cooper to see him on this matter on 31 January, after the Day of Mourning. John McEwen, a young Victorian farmer who became the minister for the interior in the Lyons government, also took seriously for a time two reports before him regarding the poor conditions of Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory. One report favoured the idea that Aboriginal people should live in an inviolate reserve in Arnhem Land. There was cause for hope.

Meanwhile, Ferguson, Patten and others distributed to national libraries, the press and select groups a copy of their manifesto, 'Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights!', advising also of the plan to hold the Day of Mourning. The two were linked, as the manifesto protested against the lower-caste position of Aboriginal people in Australian society and challenged the claim and humbug of white people that they were civilised, progressive, kindly and humane. It accused the white Australian governments of deliberately trying to exterminate Aboriginal people under the banner of 'care and protection'. It condemned the Aboriginal Protection Acts and boards, and rejected the concept of charity, demanding instead justice, decency and fair play. The pamphlet was highly critical of the New South Wales APB, and called for a national policy of acceptance and equal status, including full citizen rights and equal opportunity. Editorials on these issues were published in the capital city newspapers of the mainland states, deploring the manifesto as too idealistic about the position of Indigenous peoples in Australia. The general public did not understand the real issues.

On the National Day of Mourning, delegates arrived from eastern New South Wales rural towns. (All the delegates were Aboriginal except for one agitator, Mary M. Bennett, who attended by invitation.²) They watched the sesquicentenary street celebrations before retiring to the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, Sydney. Jack Patten

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took the chair, flanked by Bill Ferguson and Jack Kinchela from New South Wales, and Doug Nicholls and Bill Cooper from Victoria. Doug Nicholls was the Aboriginal pastor for the Fitzroy Church of Christ, a former athlete and Australian Rules footballer, and the founder of an Aboriginal hostel at Northcote (Victoria). Two members of the press were permitted to take notes and photographs but, other than the two policemen standing at the back of the hall, Mrs Bennett was the only white person allowed to attend as this was ‘black business’.

Patten said they were there to draw the attention of white people to the frightful conditions under which Aboriginal people lived and to declare they were no longer prepared to stay in the background. He demanded ordinary citizen rights for Aboriginal Australians and full equality, especially in education and employment. He read a resolution, seconded by Ferguson, which protested against the callous treatment of Aboriginal people by white people over the past 150 years. He appealed for new laws for the education and care of Aboriginal people and a new policy that would raise Aboriginal people to full citizen status and equality within the Australian community.

Ferguson also spoke, claiming it was time for Aboriginal people to do something ‘for ourselves’, which was why the Aborigines Progressive Association had been formed. He called for the abolition of the New South Wales APB, which drew enthusiastic applause from the audience. Free discussion followed and speakers called for ‘unity among our people’.

For Aboriginal people, it wasn’t the meeting that was significant — though this was a great source of pride — but the date: 26 January 1938, the Day of Mourning. From that day, white and black Australians were to be more concerned about each other’s history.

The following Monday, 31 January, Bill Ferguson, Pearl Gibbs and Jack Patten headed the planned deputation to Prime Minister Joseph Lyons on the issue of parliamentary representation. It would be almost 30 years, however, before Indigenous Australians achieved full citizen rights. Although there is no doubt that the initiative came from Aboriginal people themselves, it was only by working together with their non-Aboriginal friends and supporters that they achieved success back in 1967. The era of self-determination had not yet begun.

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Thanks to the agitation of Aboriginal leaders such as Ferguson and Gibbs, the New South Wales APB was finally replaced, in 1939, by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB). Bill Ferguson was one of its first Aboriginal representatives, along with Walter Page of Woodenbong in Queensland. From 1940, under the guidance of Professor A. P. Elkin, the new board was committed by the *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1940* (NSW) to ‘assimilating’ non-tribal Aboriginal people into the mainstream Australian community.

Unfortunately, World War II took a greater priority than the plight of Indigenous Australians from 1941, and the momentum for real change was somewhat lost as both white and black Australians prepared to protect their country from invading forces in Asia and the Pacific.

Aboriginal affairs and support groups, 1941–56

During the war years, Aboriginal leaders maintained their activities on behalf of their peoples. In 1941, Pearl Gibbs gave a talk on 2WL Wollongong, the first time an Aboriginal person had given a scripted address on a state radio network.

Pearl told me she had been born in poverty at Botany Bay in 1901. Her mother, who was born in Brewarrina and worked as a cook, was Aboriginal of mixed descent. When their mother moved to Yass to work, Pearl and her sister, Olga, lived over a draper’s shop. It was at Yass that Pearl had her first conscious experience of racial discrimination. Aboriginal children at Yass were not welcome at the local public schools and the local nuns took over the responsibility of teaching them. Pearl attended the convent school and made numerous friends. At nine years old, Pearl’s life changed when her mother remarried and the family moved to a small town about 80 kilometres from Bourke in north-west New South Wales. Her stepfather worked as a groom on a vast sheep station in the district. Pearl, Olga and her mother all worked as domestic servants at the homestead. According to Pearl, they had a happy life there. In 1917, both sisters moved to Sydney and found jobs as servants in wealthy homes at Potts Point and Kings Cross. During this time, Pearl married a British sailor and raised a family. In 1930, along with other parlour-maids and cooks, she found herself unemployed.

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From the 1920s Pearl had occasionally helped Aboriginal servant girls to get their rights—such as real wages and the right to receive unopened mail—escorting them across the Domain to the board's offices to argue their cases. Early in the 1930s when she and her mother left for Nowra to engage in seasonal pea-picking, she experienced the full force of the board's control over Aboriginal people when she received the same poor pay and was obliged to live in unhealthy conditions. Ferguson's call in 1937 to form the Aborigines Progressive Association brought Pearl back to Sydney. At Ferguson's suggestion, Pearl worked as a cook at Brewarrina Aboriginal Station late in 1937 so she could act as a 'spy', reporting to Ferguson on the conditions there. In the next two years, she learned she had a talent for laconic and hard-hitting public speaking.

Pearl Gibbs, William 'Bill' Onus and others stayed loyally behind Ferguson during the war and post-war years. Bill Onus, a former truck driver, eventually became the full-time Sydney organiser for the APA, living on a small stipend in very hard conditions. They continued to be supported by white sympathisers, particularly Michael Sawtell, a former stockman who had worked with Aboriginal people around the Simpson Desert and in the Kimberley region. Outraged by the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in those districts, he fought successfully to alleviate their conditions. When he moved to Sydney just prior to the Depression, he established a health food shop and engaged in socialist politics, proving himself to be a prolific and spellbinding public speaker. Bill Onus was only one of the many Aboriginal people who enjoyed Sawtell's hospitality and support in the early 1940s. Sawtell joined Ferguson as a member of the AWB in 1944.

By 1942, the war had turned against Australia. After weeks of retreat, Singapore fell on 15 February and four days later systematic Japanese attacks were launched on Darwin. There was anxious talk in Sydney that the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst islands might support the Japanese Army if it invaded. The Arnhem Land missions were evacuated immediately. From Methodist and Anglican mission stations Aboriginal women and children were led on an epic journey by foot through the dense, semi-deciduous tropical forest to Mataranka. There they rested before being taken by truck to Alice Springs. From Alice they travelled by train to Adelaide and Sydney. In

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South Australia, the Premier took great exception to the number of Aboriginal people and aged Chinese being sent to that state from the Northern Territory and acted to have this exodus stopped. The federal government stepped in and took full responsibility for their welfare.

During the war, employment conditions changed for the better for Aboriginal people (as well as for women). Hundreds of Aboriginal people came to the cities to work at the munitions factories, and Sydney's Aboriginal population increased in those years. The pay was good, although housing was always hard to find. In the big country towns, too, there was little unemployment and Aboriginal workers received equal pay and similar conditions to other Australians.

Meanwhile, members of the New South Wales Labor government from 1942 moved to bring amendments to Aboriginal legislation and improve conditions for Aboriginal peoples throughout the state. In 1944, Dr Herbert Evatt, the Commonwealth Attorney-General, submitted a national referendum for an Act to transfer a number of powers from the states to the federal government, including the control of Aboriginal people. Evatt's goal was to have the states agree to establish civil rights for Aboriginal Australians. But the referendum asked too much of uninformed white people and explained too little. The result was negative. Race relations did not rise again as a national question for more than 20 years.

In 1945, Bill Ferguson decided to revisit some of the Aboriginal reserves around New South Wales and was astounded to find that Erambie, the Cowra mission, which he had not visited for a decade or more, was in a very degraded state. At Moree he found 200 people living in 15 small houses without bathrooms or laundries. Immediately after the war, the chronic shortage of funds and timber for repairs led to substandard housing on most Aboriginal reserves in New South Wales.

While Ferguson was away, Bill Onus, who was then general secretary of the APA, began organising dances to raise money for the large numbers of repatriated Aboriginal soldiers coming into the city. Among them was Herbert 'Bert' Groves, who lived at La Perouse and worked as a licensed plumber. Groves began chairing some of the APA meetings and assisting Onus to organise the dances. Ultimately, most of the profits were used to establish an All-Aboriginal football club,

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the Redfern All-Blacks. The team attracted a large following and the morale of Aboriginal people in Sydney lifted.

Between 1945 and 1949, Ferguson, who was still one of the two Aboriginal representatives on the AWB, kept up his attempts to ensure the board provided and maintained decent housing for Aboriginal people on the reserves. Unfortunately, as time went by he discovered that his old Labor friends were deserting him and focusing on post-war jobs in cities.

In 1946, Ferguson learned from Dr Charles Duguid of Adelaide, founder of the Ernabella Mission in South Australia (see Chapter 2), that there was to be a rocket range project stretching from South Australia to the north of Western Australia, which would adversely affect Aboriginal people (see Chapter 2). The project, centred at Woomera, South Australia, was a collaboration between Britain and Australia. Dr Duguid was greatly concerned about the fate of the Pitjantjatjara in the Western Desert. Ferguson spread the word through his contacts, and protests were organised in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, with Aboriginal leaders as speakers.

At some stage during the months of campaigning against the rocket range, between August 1946 and May 1947, the issue of civil rights for Aboriginal Australians was lost. There were two matters of national policy to which both the major political parties were deeply committed: the development of the northern half of Australia and the defence rocket project. The campaign for Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal protests against the rocket range became inextricably linked in the minds of the politicians, so, for the time being at least, the case for Aboriginal rights lost the support of the major parties.

Ferguson himself did not take a very active part in all this campaigning. The protests in Sydney had been organised mainly by Bert Groves and John Patten. Ferguson was more preoccupied by the welfare of Aboriginal people on the New South Wales reserves and in rural industries, and he continued to agitate for their right to live in towns.

By 1947 the Melbourne-based Australian Aborigines' League, founded by Bill Cooper, had become an interstate committee with

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members in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Ferguson was the president. Bert Groves became the secretary of the Sydney Branch, and Bill Onus, with his brother Eric, led the League in Victoria following Cooper's death in 1941. In 1948, Ferguson asked members and leaders of the League to keep up their pressure on federal parliament for Aboriginal civil rights. If they were to be heard, they would need help from politicians. Members of the League wondered if it were time for Aboriginal leaders to stand for election. At one stage it seemed Pastor Doug Nicholls was going to give it a try and he established his own Aboriginal political platform, but he soon dropped the idea when he learned of some of the complexities involved in white political ideas. The League formally endorsed Bill Onus as their political candidate in the federal elections later that year, and nominated Bill Ferguson, Walter Page and Reginald Saunders — the first Aboriginal soldier to be promoted to lieutenant — as the three Senate candidates standing for New South Wales.

Ferguson arranged for an Aboriginal deputation to the Federal Minister for the Interior, Herbert Victor Johnson, MHR, to discuss, among other things, the possibility of electing their own member of parliament. The deputation included about 20 Victorians, including the Onus brothers, Pastor Doug Nicholls and Mrs Margaret Tucker. Ferguson had high hopes for support from the Chifley government, especially from Johnson. An ex-shearer, Johnson had entered politics after years of working on the committees of the Australian Workers Union. Unfortunately, however, 'coloured labour', including Aboriginal labour, had been perceived by Johnson as a threat to himself and others who had worked hard for economic justice for white stockmen and shearers in Johnson's home state of Western Australia. During the meeting, when challenged on the subject of chaining Aboriginal people under arrest, Johnson retorted that in some cases this was necessary.

Disgusted and discouraged, after the meeting Ferguson decided to leave the Australian Labor Party. Although he'd been a Labor supporter and a union man all his working life, Ferguson stood eventually as an independent candidate for the federal seat of Lawson. He campaigned for a new deal and civil rights for Aboriginal people, the abolition of the White Australia Policy, support for the United

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Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted in 1948) and higher pensions, but he received few votes. On the night of his final speech he collapsed. He died on 4 January 1950.

Bert Groves, Secretary of the AAL in Sydney, replaced Ferguson on the New South Wales AWB and served two and a half terms. Pearl Gibbs replaced Groves for part of a term in 1954, serving until 1957. Groves, Gibbs and Doug Nicholls were increasingly in demand as guest speakers for a range of organisations prepared to be interested in their future, such as Moral Re-armament Australia (MRA) and the Communist Party of Australia (the CPA did not have a White Australia policy). These leaders, Ferguson's successors, made new recruits for the cause.

In March 1956, during her term on the AWB, Gibbs persuaded her friend Mrs Faith Bandler that it was time to form a new organisation. Gibbs had met Bandler in the New South Wales branch of the Council for Aboriginal Rights (CAR). In the new organisation, Gibbs argued, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people could work together as equals, learning from one another. There would be no room for any humbug. The result was the formation of a group that became the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship.

The Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship, 1956

Faith Bandler was born near Murwillumbah on the far north coast of New South Wales. She came from a large family that valued music, books and personal independence. Her father, a banana grower, was a South Sea Islander from Vanuatu and had been a sugar cane worker in North Queensland. Her mother was descended from Indians living in Brisbane. After service in the Women's Land Army during World War II (1942–45) Faith lived in Sydney, where she met Pearl Gibbs and Ray Peckham. Ray Peckham was from a well-known Dubbo Aboriginal family and had been a supporter of Bill Ferguson. Travel in Europe, including part of Eastern Europe, broadened Faith's political awareness. She married Hans Bandler, a Viennese civil engineer and Jewish refugee, who had been incarcerated briefly in Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps in 1938–39.

At first, Pearl Gibbs could not persuade any other Aboriginal people to get involved in the new group. The six people appointed to

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form the AAF were Faith Bandler, Grace Bardsley, Pearl Gibbs, George Singer, John Walker and Edgar Walters.

I remember Grace Bardsley for her remarkable political style. In 1956 she was about 35 years old, fair-haired with light blue eyes and an open manner. She was then working as private secretary to the managing director of a Sydney timber export firm but had previously worked for the then communist-run North Australia Workers Union (NAWU) in the Northern Territory. In her spare time she worked for organisations devoted to peace or social justice. Grace had joined the Communist Party in 1941, as many young people did, but became alienated when she denounced Stalinism. She met Pearl Gibbs in 1943. Gibbs, with Michael Sawtell, was then campaigning for Aboriginal citizenship rights. When Gibbs called for volunteer typists for the APA, Grace gladly responded. They became good friends. Pearl introduced Grace to the social and racial context of Aboriginal oppression and poverty. At Pearl Gibbs's urging, Grace Bardsley agreed to join the new group.

Gibbs and Bandler set about immediately trying to recruit more members. Trixie and Jack Bell, Ben and Sarah (Pepper) Cruse from the far South Coast of New South Wales, and Jack and Mary Simms of La Perouse were among the first Aboriginal people to sign up. The Bell, Cruse and Simms families spread the word about the formation of the new group to other Aboriginal residents of Sydney. Jack Bell persuaded Charles and Peggy Leon, Alec Grace and Jim McGrath, the latter two of Ferguson's former followers, to join. Charles Leon, not long in Sydney from Werris Creek, near Quirindi in north-west New South Wales, had moved to the city with Peggy hoping for a fresh start. He worked as a builder's labourer and lived in a terrace house in Ultimo, near the present-day Powerhouse Museum. Grace and McGrath were both pensioners, respectively from Cowra and Nambucca Heads. They were living in the city in order to claim their pension, which they were denied while they lived on an Aboriginal reserve.

The two founders maintained their recruiting activities for the new group. Lucy Woodcock, a retired primary school principal who had encouraged mature-aged Aboriginal people to attend the Cleveland Street Evening School, was a popular recruit among black and white

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members alike. Irene McIlraith, a friend of Bandler, also joined up. McIlraith was a professional office secretary working freelance for commercial firms. Her family were middle-class Jews who had been living in Berlin, where her father had edited a film journal. During the Depression, McIlraith had studied industrial chemistry at technical college and had joined the left-wing Socialist Youth as she was sympathetic to the German working class. She had arrived in Australia at the age of 24 in 1938, harbouring a fierce hatred of racial law and discrimination and a courageous spirit.

When it was thought there were enough interested parties to form the new group, Pearl Gibbs arranged for the first official meeting to be held at Woodcock's small flat in George Street, Sydney, in March 1956. At the meeting, individual Aboriginal people confided their personal stories of suffering and discrimination to a sympathetic audience. The assembled guests learned how Aboriginal people were segregated at picture theatres, about the poor housing conditions, and how difficult it was for Aboriginal people to live among white people and find jobs in the country towns. The sole purpose of the AWB, so someone said, was to control Aboriginal people. The meeting was moved by this disclosure. Faith Bandler roused those present with a speech urging the formation of the new organisation. There was a good response, and then Muir Holburn, a poet and a later AAF president, put forward the suggestion that the name of such an organisation should be the 'Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship', to convey the idea that the two 'races' would be working together. The name was approved and the new organisation came into being.

The first general meeting of the AAF was held in Sydney on 11 July 1956, and received a brief report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'The main aim of the new organisation will be to promote better understanding between aborigines [*sic*] and European Australians.' An unexpected outcome that night was that Bert Groves, a Gamilaroi man, was elected AAF president and not the organisation's founder, Pearl Gibbs. Gibbs became vice-president. She was the stronger fighter and could boast a lifetime of service in Aboriginal affairs, but it was the custom to select men for president in most societies. It seems that when Pearl Gibbs was not being discriminated against for being Aboriginal, she was suffering because she was a woman. And this was

Segregation and assimilation, 1938–61

not the first or last time it happened. During Pearl's time on the Welfare Board, from 1954 to 1957, the men took to retiring to the local pub to continue their discussions, but as neither women nor Aboriginal people were allowed in, Gibbs was denied any input. Eventually she resigned from both the AAF and the board, upstaged in both cases by Bert Groves.

Muir Holburn wanted the AAF to form cross-racial friendships, so new people were soon recruited.³ These included a poet, Roland Robinson; a linguist, Geoffrey O'Grady; a trade union secretary; Albert Thompson, who had supported Ferguson and Onus years before; and Shaun McIlwraith (no relation to Irene), a journalist. Grace Bardsley found an unusual and helpful member in June Gale, a young childcare teacher with the Sydney Day Nursery Association. Gale joined the Fellowship to meet Aboriginal people. Nancy Ellis, a young Nyungar from Western Australia who was training to be a singer, also became active in the group.

At a Christmas celebration later that year, someone suggested the executive should organise a political meeting in Sydney Town Hall to raise the Fellowship's profile. A number of possible guest speakers were discussed, but in the end the unanimous vote was for Jessie Street.

A feminist leader since the 1920s, Street had just returned to Sydney from London, where she had run a subcommittee on Aboriginal rights for the Anti-Slavery Society.⁴ She had already corresponded with a number of people involved in Aboriginal affairs in Australia about the possible formation of a national Aboriginal body. When she met Groves and Bandler in the office of the Fellowship's solicitor, Miss Christian Jollie-Smith, Street explained to them why she was pursuing this course. The federal government, she told them, was prevented from accepting any responsibility for most Aboriginal Australians by the Australian Constitution. She pointed out the relevant clauses of the Constitution and explained that a referendum would be necessary to have them changed. Groves and Bandler, aware of Evatt's earlier failed attempt to change the Constitution, were more indignant than ever at its injustice. Street encouraged them to distribute petition forms at the Town Hall meeting to pressure the government for the required referendum.

Personal and political awakenings, 1938–57

By this time, Street had consulted Brian Fitzpatrick, Secretary of the Melbourne-based Australian Council for Civil Liberties, and had already drafted the petition herself, with legal advice from Jollie-Smith. She had even, so she said, received some private moral support from Paul Hasluck, the Minister for Territories (although publicly he was enacting his assimilation policy in the Northern Territory via *Welfare Ordinance 1953* (Cwth), which came into effect in 1957).

Thus, Lady Jessie Street came to be the first guest speaker of the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship at Sydney Town Hall on 27 April 1957. At that meeting she urged her audience to get as many people as possible to sign their names on this petition and put pressure on the Commonwealth Government for a referendum for constitutional reform on behalf of Indigenous Australians.

When Jean and I walked into the meeting on that fateful day, we simply went to find out if discrimination against Aboriginal people existed in Australia. Our education in Aboriginal affairs was about to begin.