WILLIAM COOPER (1861 – 1941) - AUSTRALIA'S LEADING CIVIL RIGHTS FIGURE OF THE 20TH CENTURY
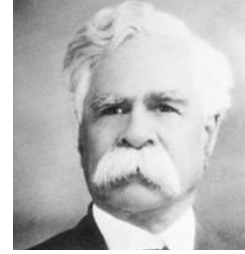

Born in Yorta-Yorta Country at the junction of the Murray and Goulburn Rivers, William Cooper grew up on the Mologa Mission near Cummeragunga. One of his sons, Lynch Cooper was to win fame as the 1928 Stawell Gift winner, but William's fame was harder earned.

Through his union membership, William learned advocacy skills and soon became a leading voice for his dispossessed people. However, it was only after his retirement at age 72 in 1933 that he was able to devote himself full time to civil rights issues. He became Secretary of the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne and was the driving force behind a petition that sought direct parliamentary representation and land rights for Aboriginal people. In 1935 he led the first Aboriginal deputation to a Commonwealth Minister and in 1937 led the first deputation to a Prime Minister, asking for federal control of Aboriginal Affairs. He collected the signatures of 1,814 Aboriginal people from all over Australia in a petition to King George VI seeking constitutional change to form an Aboriginal constituency. However, in 1938, the Prime Minister of the day refused to forward it to the King.

William's civil rights activities were, however, not limited just to the plight of his own people. In 1938 he led a march from his home in Melbourne's west to the German Consulate in Collins Street, protesting about the Nazi persecution of Jews. He also took a personal protest about Nazi persecution of Jews to the League of Nations and is the only private individual in the world to have done so. He has earned the undying respect of Jewish people across the globe for his stand, and a University in Israel has been named after him. Yet how many ordinary Australians have even heard his name and how many schoolchildren have ever learnt about his importance as a leader of civil rights in Australia? –And now belatedly Cooper has a Melbourne federal electorate named after him.