

Cairns author  
Barbara Miller.  
photo // Stewart McLean



**C**airns author Barbara Miller has written a historical book about William Cooper, an Aboriginal man and activist, who also stood up for the Jewish people after the events of Kristallnacht in 1938.

*William Cooper, Gentle Warrior: Standing up for Australian Aborigines and Persecuted Jews*, 18 months in the making, was launched at Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative in Mooroopna on Yorta Yorta land on December 4 last year and later in Sydney and Melbourne.

"William Cooper lived between 1861 and 1941," Barbara says. "He was a very important historical figure and set up the Australian Aborigines League. What he did formed a platform that Aborigines could work on."

Cooper was born in Yorta Yorta around the junction of

the Goulburn and Murray rivers in northeast Victoria and was raised and schooled at an Aboriginal mission called Maloga.

His first act for indigenous rights was to send the Maloga petition to the Governor of Victoria in 1887, looking for land for his people. As secretary of the Australian Aborigines League he petitioned state and federal government for enfranchisement and land rights.

A prolific letter writer, Cooper collected more than 1800 signatures, and wanted to send a petition to the King of England to look for special Aboriginal electorates in Federal Parliament but the Australian government refused to pass on his letter because they said he wasn't an Australian citizen.

This prompted him, with The Aborigines Progressive Association, to instigate the first national day of mourning for Aborigines on Australia Day in 1938.

Cooper also created National Aborigines Day, which has eventually led to week-long NAIDOC celebrations, and for laying the foundations for a movement that has survived to this day.

What is less known, however, is that William Cooper led a delegation to the German consulate in Melbourne after Kristallnacht to condemn the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany.

In a re-enactment of Cooper's walk to the German Consulate on December 6, 1938, his grandson, Alf Turner (Uncle Boydie), brought a replica of the letter Cooper tried to hand over on behalf of the Australian Aborigines League, which was originally refused.

The walk, 74 years later, organised by Barbara Miller, traced the journey from Cooper's home in Footscray, Melbourne to the site that was the German Consulate in 1938, in Collins St, and this time the German Consulate accepted the letter.

It was led by Kevin Russell, Cooper's great-grandson, and some of the people who followed in the march were Jewish holocaust survivors.

"It was very moving with some of the Holocaust survivors in tears to hear the German Consul express his sorrow at what had happened, and that a wrong needed to be made right," Barbara says. "It was important for Uncle Boydie to complete his grandfather's work."

Barbara says William Cooper was a gentle man, with great tenacity.

"He was someone who got depressed at times at the slow progress (in Aboriginal affairs) but he never gave up," she says. "Even when he was old and sick, he would write letters to prime ministers and members of parliament and newspapers all over Australia."

"Even though he had limited resources, Cooper travelled around most states in Australia to reach as many Aboriginal people as possible."

■ *William Cooper, Gentle Warrior* is available from Angus and Robertson Cairns Central and at [www.barbara-miller-books.com](http://www.barbara-miller-books.com). Barbara Miller is doing a book signing today at Angus and Robertson, Cairns Central, from 10am to 1pm.

Although the author initiated the re-enactment of William Cooper's walk, organizing it was a team effort of Abe Schwarz, the author, Michael Pearce, the William Cooper family and the Jewish Holocaust Centre