

## The Lone Protestor: A M Fernando in Australia and Europe

**Review Number:** 1400

**Publish date:** Thursday, 11 April, 2013

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**ISBN:** 9781922059055

**Date of Publication:** 2012

**Price:** £29.50

**Pages:** 256pp.

**Publisher:** Aboriginal Studies Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:** Canberra

**Reviewer:** Oliver Haag

Tracing the path of an Australian Aboriginal political activist through four decades of early 20th-century Europe must surely have been a challenging and often surprising task. With only a handful of original notebooks, no surviving photographs and a paucity of published reminiscences, Paisley's biography of Anthony Martin Fernando (1864–1949) presents not only innovative research into long-forgotten political life but also a compelling insight into transnational narratives of race. The nine chapters reconstruct the stages of Fernando's activism from his initial experiences of racism in Western Australia, which drove him to leave Australia for good, to his arrival in Europe and later relocation to London. Through registration and employment certificates, Paisley reconstructs his first movements in Austria to his eventual internment during the First World War. As an Aboriginal Australian then without entitlement to citizenship, Fernando sought British naturalisation several times to gain access to food parcels. By stressing his origin as a 'Black man from Australia', he could avoid British-Australian authorities assuming him Aboriginal by making them believe that he was of African-Australian heritage instead. Whereas British-Australian authorities did not recognise Fernando as Aboriginal – partly because of his western education – Austrian authorities clearly classified him as an *Australneger* ('Australian Negro'). The translation of *Australneger* into Anglo-Saxon racial denomination as 'Negro' finally placed him as non-Aboriginal and prevented him from his feared deportation to Australia. Eventually, this rendered possible the conferral of British citizenship.

Already in internment, Fernando began protesting Aboriginal dispossession by British imperialism and contrasted the callous attitude of white Anglo-Saxons with that of the Austrians, whom he termed a good and honourable people. After the war, Fernando continued his protests in Switzerland and Italy by publicly denouncing the maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians through British dispossession. Partly due to his benevolent view of German colonialism (which included the rejection of German colonial guilt) and partly by his production of professional political pamphlets, he was soon suspected of being a German agent and an ally of Fascist Italy, respectively. Paisley, through painstaking analysis, proves such allegations fundamentally wrong: Fernando, as the book's title indicates, was a lone fighter never involved in any political movement. In fact, his leafleting of pilgrims in Rome resulted in his arrest and final expulsion from Italy out of fear that his critique of (British) colonialism might undermine Britain's expected support of Fascist colonialism. Fernando became a critic of Fascism, bemoaning that it would ruin what he called the 'good-hearted' Italian people.

In London, his negative views regarding white people hardened. Wearing a black cloth adorned with white skeletons to symbolise the British killing of his people, Fernando picketed before Australia House, preached at Speaker's Corner and even used court rooms to politically critique Australia. England, in his eyes, became the symbol of 'savagery' and murder, leading him to place Anglo-Saxons on the lowest ladder of human development (a reversed constellation of racial development then conferred upon Aboriginal Australians). Fernando became highly suspicious of white friendships. Paisley identifies a few Australian and British supporters, yet hardly any of them would have been designated as true friends. In contrast to many of his contemporary Aboriginal activists in Australia, he did not count on alliance with white people, neither humanitarians nor Britons. Britain, to him, was the source and not the solution of Aboriginal suffering. The author effectively shows Fernando's sense of Aboriginal sovereignty and agency. In rejecting the help of humanitarians, Fernando not only rejected white paternalism but also reclaimed Aboriginal self-determination. His dismissive attitude towards humanitarian support ultimately proved very efficient in making humanitarians re-think their culture's own inhumanity. A humanitarian supporter commented upon Fernando's admission into an aged care facility: 'At last, she concluded, he had come to see that the British did look after their elderly and, in this respect at least, were not so entirely different from the Aborigines' (p. 172). This comment reads as a powerful subversion of British superiority gauged according to the standards of Aboriginal morality.

Paisley's study is more than a biography of an obviously unusual life; it unearths the intricacies of Fernando's activism, which was never backed by any political movement. The solitary nature of his protests might have reflected his wish for independence and autonomy but it equally represented his mistrust of inter-racial friendship. This mistrust leads me to expand on my own reading of two major themes that permeate the book: Fernando's perception of race and the faith he invested in Europe. This reading is not to allude to any shortcoming (in fact, Paisley's study made for one of the most inspiring reads I have had in the last few years), but to elicit theoretical considerations implicit in her text. Drawing from Fernando's views on politics and history, Paisley shows that he employed a racial worldview that, partly due to his Catholic faith, was steeped in a Christian hierarchy of racialised morality. Whereas he highly valued Aboriginal Australians and South Asians, he exhibited a derogatory view towards (sub-Saharan) African, Irish and Jewish people. Britons seem to have occupied, especially towards the end of his life, the lowest level of racial morality. These views were partly influenced by anti-Jewish Catholicism and ideas of African 'primitivism' and 'savagery'. Particularly, the alleged promiscuity and sinfulness then conferred upon African races led Fernando not only to differentiate in morality between Africans on the one hand and Aboriginal Australians and Indians on the other but also to somehow exclude Africans from his critique of British imperialism. The hidden relations of racism between people of colour were in themselves highly complex. Paisley argues that Fernando's anti-Semitism was aggravated by his own experiences of anti-black racism: 'When castigated for being a black interloper who should go back to his own country, he retorted that the real "foreigner" was the "Jewish" shopkeeper in Petticoat Lane who had told him, "You black beast. You are the dirt (pointing to the ground). Your type should be killed"' (p. 152). The London of the 1920s and 1930s was a thoroughly racialised world. Racism, as Fernando's story shows, was highly intricate and not merely subject to a simple

white–black dichotomy.

The category of white people here is of particular interest. Although it is not explicit by Paisley, there seems to be a fundamental difference between Fernando's perception of white people from Britain and his perception of white people from continental Europe. This becomes conspicuous in several instances, particularly with regard to inter-racial friendship. As Paisley unearths, Fernando had several British supporters who, however, he did not really deem friends (the author remains inexplicit about the extent of his friendships, but the text suggests that they were scarce); only at the close of his life did he confide that the loyal support of one of his former British employers rendered him more 'black' than 'white'. This deep mistrust of white people appears to have been highly different in case of Europeans. Paisley mentions, rather in passing, Fernando's devastation on the 'death notice for his dearest friend in the Milan Company, Angelo Bossi' (p. 93). Perhaps reflecting the scant source material, the author does not provide further information on this friendship or biographical detail on Angelo Bossi. The text itself suggests that Bossi was very likely white. The salient point here is that whereas inter-racial friendship seemed to be precluded in Britain, it appeared to exist with relative ease in Europe. More precisely, Fernando's perception of Europeans seemed to have been carried by a trans-racial understanding of friendship, one that seemed to have written race out of friendship. This positive view of white people is also evident in his appraisal of the 'good' and 'honourable' Austrian people, among whom he initially wished to spend the rest of his life. To Fernando, racism seemed to matter less in Europe than in Britain: 'Unlike in his later writing about life among the English in London, he did not comment on his experience of racial discrimination during internment [in Austria]' (pp. 45–6). Determined by the political conviction that Britons and Australians were solely responsible for Aboriginal suffering, Fernando differentiated between white people in Europe and Britain, the former acting as potential friends while the latter were castigated as the most morally corrupt 'savage' race. This differentiation shows the complex dynamic of racial narratives, which does not necessarily evince a fixed understanding of race. Rather than interpreting Fernando's unflattering views of white people as a homogenising view of race, I think the cultural spatiality of white people seems to have been a bendy category in his racial conception. This narrative was obviously influenced by politics and individual experiences and partly related to a wider web of sympathetic views on Europe among people of colour. Whiteness was not a simple enemy category; it showed surprising flexibility according to space and personal loyalty. Two distinct categories of whiteness, I opine, were operating in Fernando's perceptions of white people: a European whiteness (or perhaps rather a Europeanness drained of its whiteness) and a British or Anglo-Saxon whiteness.

This exemption of white Europeans from the general critique of white people (that is, Britons or Anglo-Saxons) brings me to Fernando's highly idealised view of Europe. This idealisation emerged during his adolescence in Australia, with the adoption of the name Fernando in an effort to dignify the Italian people. Paisley argues that his Catholic faith played a central role in the benevolent view of the Italian people. On a European level, I think, there was another dimension to his fondness, that is, Europe's perceived detachment from Anglo-Saxon imperialism. Certainly Europeans, and not only Britons, played a vital role in the colonisation and dispossession of Aboriginal Australians, but they were (tactically?) excluded from his anti-imperial critique. Not necessarily exceptional in his positive view of Europe, Fernando promulgated the concept of self-governed Aboriginal reserves under direct European mandate. He expected Aboriginal civilisation to renew Europe intellectually and spiritually. A thus renewed Europe, Fernando reasoned, would serve as a political ally against British imperialism. These political possibilities must have played a central role in Fernando's perspectives on Europe, as exemplified in the overt support of German colonialism and critique of German colonial guilt. As a (self-)educated man who was surely fluent in German, he must have come across the massive German propaganda campaigns against British exploitation of Indigenous people. Colonial revisionism in Weimar Germany and under Nazism attempted to dismantle the British accusation of German colonial guilt. The rhetorical devices used to refute British propaganda as a 'colonial guilt lie' (*Kolonialschuldliüge*) resulted not only in a propagandistic idealisation of German-Indigenous relations (as evinced in the loyal East African Askari myth, for instance) but also in the denunciation of what was called the British extermination of Aboriginal Australians. German colonial

propaganda in particular referenced Aboriginal Australia as the epitome of British slaughter. Periodicals such as *Die Woche* or the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, replete with such propaganda, were widely disseminated and highly likely to have been read by, or at least known to, Fernando.

Paisley's reference to Fernando's rejection of the German guilt reproach indicates his thorough acquaintance with these debates. Either duped by German propaganda or (more likely) consciously transforming it into his own political narrative, Fernando came to consider Europe as a potential ally of Aboriginal Australia. Apart from his religious influence, his view of Europe appears partly like a product of political calculation to oppose Britain. German colonial propaganda, in this event, was consciously hijacked by an Aboriginal activist and thereby, ironically enough, confirmed in its supposed veracity. Thus was constructed an Aboriginal-German (and Aboriginal-European) friendship in opposition to the British imperialist project. Europe, though complicit in the imperialism that affected Aboriginal Australia, seemed the lesser evil. Surely Fernando must have experienced anti-black racism in Europe, as Paisley suggests. The reason he ignored European racism was likely to be political calculation. Germany's strident critique of British imperialism especially must have appeared as an appealing and welcome underpinning of his protest against Aboriginal dispossession. In a sense, the lone protestor was perhaps not that lonesome – he had 'his' Europe as notional support behind him.

The particular merit of the *Lone Protestor* for Australian Aboriginal studies lies in its uncovering of the transnational dimensions of Aboriginal protest and the way it provides a sound case study of an early 20th-century Aboriginal presence in Europe. Aboriginal intellectuals have long reshaped ideas of Europe (and Britain) and, clearly, more studies similar to this are needed to understand Australian Aboriginal history in its interwoven local, national and global contexts. For Britain, Paisley's book effectively demonstrates the intricate mechanisms of racialisation among people of colour, provides an impressive insight into an Aboriginal ethnography of white Britain and, for all the asymmetric power-relations inherent to imperialism, uncovers the agency of colonised subjects in creating counter-narratives to hegemonic racial discourse. The significance of *The Lone Protestor* for European history perhaps lies mostly in its being one of the first studies to have thoroughly examined an aspect of early 20th-century Aboriginal-European relations not from the dominant European perspective, but from the view of an Aboriginal Australian. This focus on an Aboriginal viewpoint is a highly welcome contrast to the many studies of European interest in indigenous cultures which implicitly re-inscribe the one-sided importance of Europe in what has actually been a cross-cultural encounter. Paisley's biography leads us to consider that it is not merely Europe that appropriated Aboriginal cultures but that Aboriginal Australians also appropriated Europe for their political and personal ends. Paisley's work invites us to further examine Aboriginal interest in Europe. In its reversal of the perspective from Europe to Aboriginal Australia, the *Lone Protestor* has the potential to instigate a paradigm shift in the scholarship on Aboriginal-European relations.

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment.

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