

Anthony Martin Fernando: The Aboriginal activist who took his people's fight to London

A century ago, Fernando travelled to Europe in self-imposed exile to protest the massacres of Indigenous people in Australia. Once there he was interned and deported to Britain – where he took the fight to the streets



Fernando, the Lone Protestor by Daryl Ciubal, depicting Anthony Martin Fernando, an Australian Indigenous political activist in Britain and continental Europe in the early 20th century. Illustration: Daryl Ciubal/AIATSIS

It is the London winter of 1928. Fog blankets the city.

Pedestrians and commuters along one of the city's busiest thoroughfares are arrested at the spectacle directly outside the Edwardian baroque marble facade of Australia House on the corner of the Strand and Aldwych.

They see an elderly, longhaired, Australian Aboriginal man. He is dressed in a black greatcoat. The only contrast to his dark appearance is a full, silver beard and a cape upon which are attached dozens of small white rubber skeletons. He also wears a sandwich board placard of the type used by street vendors, all across the city, to advertise their wares.

But this old man, Anthony Martin Fernando, a toymaker by trade, is not advertising his products. Instead, his placard condemns the appalling treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in colonial and newly federated Australia.

Fernando repeatedly points to the little skeletons and cries out to passers-by: "This is all that Australia has left of my people."

Fernando was also a regular speaker at London's Hyde Park Corner during the 1930s.

It was perhaps a quarter of a century since the expatriate Fernando had turned his back on Australia in disgust at its harsh treatment of his people, and departed on a mission to take his protest to the streets of Europe. Driven by Catholicism, the love of a mother from whom he'd been separated since childhood in Sydney and activism for the rights of his Aboriginal people, Fernando made his way through Asia to Austria (where he was interned during the first world war), to Italy and England, where he died in hospital in 1949.

He is probably the first Indigenous Australian to dedicate his life to activism in Europe (many have since followed). His attempt to petition the pope and his decision to protest against the treatment of Australian indigenes at the empire's very epicenter, his repeated arrests and his willingness to work as a manservant, welder, toymaker and jeweller to support his advocacy, certainly render him one of the most committed and enigmatic.

Fiona Paisley in her biography of Fernando, *The Lone Protester*, writes: "When taking up a position in front of the London headquarters of the Australian government, Fernando assumed the appearance of an Old Testament prophet. In the gloom of a London winter, the white skeletons on their black background must have created an ethereal and haunting effect. Turning the busy thoroughfare of the Strand into his political stage, he was transformed from ubiquitous sandwich-board man and friendly street toy seller into ex-colonial pariah."

Drawn from extensive archival research in Australia and Europe, Paisley, who teaches at Griffith University, has assembled the most comprehensive story to date on the life of Fernando, who was born at Woolloomooloo, Sydney, in 1864. His mother Sarah was Aboriginal and his father, Mariano Silva, was probably south Asian.

Paisley traces his life from Sydney to Western Australia and the frontier township of Peak Hill, where he railed against police injustices against the local Aboriginal people including – he implied in later life – the unpunished murder of Indigenous people.

She recounts his time in Austria where, interned during the war, Britain declined his claim to imperial citizenship and then in post-war Italy where he tried to present a petition to the pope and was later arrested for distributing pamphlets alleging that Britain was exterminating his people.

Deported to Britain in 1923, he worked for a time as a servant for a London barrister and travelled back to continental Europe before returning permanently to London in 1928. His most conspicuous period of protest

outside Australia House coincided with news from Australia of massacres of Aboriginal people in Western Australia (Forrest River, 1927) and the Northern Territory ([Coniston](#), 1928) for which no white perpetrators were prosecuted.

“If Fernando’s protests were indeed a direct response to the recent massacres in Australia, then his skeletons stood not only for acts of murder but for the enduring nature of Aboriginal history and memory,” Paisley writes.

The Forrest River massacre perpetrators failed to destroy all of the evidence of the killings with fire, enabling piles of bones to be discovered later.

“The persistence of the bones at the murder site near Forrest River spoke not only of a cover-up, but also of the ineluctable capacity of the dead to haunt the present,” Paisley writes.

But Fernando was not only concerned with the brutal racism of the empire against black skinned people in Australia. In a series of notebooks that are now in the collection of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra, he detailed the hardships of his life in hostels (he lived in a Salvation Army hostel in central London for some time) and railed against the racial abuse that he received on the streets as a vendor.



The AM Fernando collection of notebooks and letters. Photograph: Daryl Ciubal/AIATSIS

For example, in October 1929 he wrote: “I was subject to much shirking & told by women & men passing get off Black thing. Trams would not stop went pass Laughing I was boycotted by the passer’s by walking along the Road.”

Fernando made successive court appearances from 1929 to 1938 in London, including for assault. On one occasion he pulled a handgun on a fellow lodger who had taunted him for being black. His plight was well-reported across Australia, including in *The Northern Miner*, from Charters Towers in Queensland, on 4 February 1929.

The paper reported that Fernando told the judge: “I am boycotted everywhere. Look at my rags. I cannot make ends meet. All you hear is ‘Go away black man’. It is all Tommy rot to say that we are savages. Whites shoot, slowly hang, or starve us. I have pleaded the aborigines’ case since 1887.”

As he became older and infirm, Fernando’s behaviour became increasingly idiosyncratic

Despite being such a conspicuous presence on the London streets and in the courts, neither Paisley nor AIATSIS has been able to find a photograph of Fernando taken at any time in his life. Paisley unsuccessfully searched numerous archives – including those of newspapers, charities and public institutions – in several continents. Given the proliferation of personal photography from the second decade of the 20th century, such a photograph plausibly exists in a private collection somewhere.

“By this period, photography as a pastime had become relatively inexpensive and accessible to many, from the school age hobbyist to the active professional. Camera clubs, societies and publications had flourished to that point in time, developing and deepening the understanding of photography as a means to new art and documentary forms,” says Gerald Preiss, the manager of preservation digitisation at AIATSIS.

“It is quite plausible that the striking figure of AM Fernando, adorned with toy skeletons, in protest on the Strand in front of Australia House would attract attention and a photographer’s eye.”

Paisley says that she made every effort to find a photo of an image of Fernando, other than to appeal directly to the British and Australian public.

“It would be truly wonderful if someone reading this owns a family photograph album of London in the 1920s and 1930s that includes an image of an Aboriginal man standing outside Australia House wearing small toy skeletons representing frontier violence against his people, or speaking at Hyde Park Corner on the same urgent matter.”

Late in life Fernando attracted the attention of sympathisers, including Aboriginal rights advocate Mary Bennett, who interviewed him in a prison cell while he was awaiting trial at the Old Bailey.

In 1948 he was admitted to Claybury hospital suffering from senile dementia. He died there in 1949, aged 84.

Fernando's courageous frontline activism meant half a life of ex-patriotism, much of it spent in the bosom of his people's oppressor.

This activism seems no less relevant today as Indigenous advocates militate for proper cultural and historical acknowledgment of the violence accompanying European invasion and settlement, and while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders divide on the merits and means of constitutional recognition.

As Paisley points out in her book: "One of Fernando's most significant legacies is his assertion that 'Australia' without recognition of Aboriginal autonomy was essentially genocidal, and that an entirely new way of organising settler colonisation, based on a form of self-rule for Aboriginal people within Australia was urgently needed."