

## CHAPTER 1

## First Forty Years and his ‘Guiding Star’

At the heart of the story of Fernando’s childhood is a painful separation. Fernando was born to an Aboriginal mother in Woolloomooloo, Sydney on 6 April 1864, details about his origin and identity that he would repeat many times during the second half of his life. Record-keeping in the mid-nineteenth century in the colony of New South Wales rarely included Aboriginal births, so the story of his earliest years emerges from a patchwork of archival sources, including a number of evocative autobiographical statements he shared with some Anglo-Australian people he met in London during the late 1920s. While much about Fernando’s first years remains sketchy and dependent on hearsay, on a number of occasions he stressed the importance in his life of the Aboriginal mother he never really knew.

Several second-hand reports indicate that Fernando chose to explain himself to non-Aboriginal listeners as an Aboriginal man whose formative years were marked by rupture. When Fernando talked about his life with white supporters interested in his origins, connections of country, language or community were not the fundamental features of what he told them. Instead, he located his Aboriginality primarily in his connection to his mother who, he asserted, was the person who most inspired his life’s work. Or perhaps more precisely, it was her absence from his early life that became an abiding inspiration for his lifelong mission against injustice.

### **The guiding star of his life**

In 1929, when he was sixty-five, Fernando honoured his mother as ‘the guiding star’ of his life. The moving phrase that so well captured the continuing

presence of his mother was recorded by Mary Montgomery Bennett, an Anglo-Australian humanitarian living in London, who met Fernando that year. In two versions, one written to a colleague soon afterwards and the other published in a book in the following year, Bennett offered close approximations of Fernando's own words:

A good father is good, but a good mother is above every other good. I was taken from my mother when I was little, but the thought of her has been the guiding star of my life.<sup>1</sup>

I was taken from my tribe before I was old enough to remember my mother, but the thought of my mother is the guiding star of my life.<sup>2</sup>

As these testimonials suggest—initially in Australia and later in Europe—in protesting for Aboriginal rights Fernando renewed a connection with his mother's memory. Rather than being diminished by distance or the passing of time, their connection was commemorated in each of the acts of protest that signposted his political career. Unable (or unwilling) to provide many recollections about his early life, Fernando spoke instead about the spiritual guidance of his mother that linked him to the Aboriginal people of past, present and future and for whom he fought so determinedly many times over his life. His words echo nonetheless the importance of the ancestors in Aboriginal culture as guides to the living.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even without any apparent knowledge of his mother's own story, Fernando appears to have been connected through her to Aboriginal ways.

Reflecting on her exchanges with Fernando close to the end of her own life, Bennett felt she shared an emotional and psychological bond with him in relation to his maternal loss, as her own mother had left her behind in Australia as a child.<sup>4</sup> A less sentimental reading of Bennett's sense of connection would point out that the two had grown up on opposite sides of the colonial divide. As the child of pastoralists, in the absence of her own mother Bennett had enjoyed the care of Aboriginal women who were the unpaid companions of her childhood years. Bennett also assumed that Fernando had been forcibly taken from his mother. She included this inference in a chapter she wrote in the inter-war years in her groundbreaking book, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*, published in 1930 (only months after she and Fernando first met) concerning her opposition to child removal policies.

In Bennett's mind, the tenacity of Fernando's love for his mother beyond the grave stood in stark contrast to government policies of child removal,

then gathering pace in Australia. During the 1920s, the question of an Aboriginal woman's love for her taken child had become one of the most poignant elements in a public debate about the morality of child removal. Infamously, the Chief Protector of Western Australia, AO Neville, argued against Bennett and her ilk by insisting that Aboriginal mothers soon forgot those children placed into government settlements.<sup>5</sup> But Fernando's separation from his mother occurred long before such policies with their advocacy of systemic removal to bring about final assimilation. Instead, his mother may well have entrusted him to missionaries to be educated or considered for the priesthood. Unlike outback Western Australia during the 1920s, Aboriginal people in late nineteenth century Sydney were already part of the increasingly urbanised world of post-European contact.<sup>6</sup>

### **Woolloomooloo**

According to Fernando, his relatives lived in the small Aboriginal community at Woolloomooloo, close by Sydney Harbour (see Figure I, between pp. 76–77). Early settlement had expanded rapidly in the first decades of the new colony, and the area had been set aside for local Aboriginal people to continue earning their living from fishing. By the early 1800s, over two hundred were living in several government huts and trading the fish they caught with Europeans.<sup>7</sup> Despite sharing a common language, the small community consisting of several Aboriginal groups had arrived in the previous generation from the northern coast of New South Wales. Mobility was integral to surviving the impact of colonisation but Aboriginal communities were also beginning to formally assert their claim upon country. By the 1860s, for example, local people farming to the west on the Nepean and Hawkesbury Rivers had begun petitioning for the return of their tribal lands.<sup>8</sup>

In a dramatic leap of the imagination, Bennett thought that Fernando's apparent lack of knowledge about his people could be explained by early frontier violence in the Sydney region. She conjectured that his mother had been the last survivor of a local 'tribe'.<sup>9</sup> This unlikely notion says more about Bennett's own understanding of the early days in the colony than it helps to unlock the facts behind Fernando's origins. She was aware of the terrible impact of violence, disease and loss of lands upon local peoples, and interpreted them as being responsible for the erasure of his memory about a former way of life. In contrast to this analysis, more recent accounts of contact point to the complex ways of being Aboriginal within the colonial world and of negotiating forms of accommodation, even where trauma and violence predominated.<sup>10</sup>

By the time of his early childhood in the 1860s and 1870s, only a few stalwart Aborigines were residing at Woolloomooloo. Within a decade or so, public opposition to their presence was encouraged by racial theories proclaiming the supposed demise of the Aboriginal people and their descent into vagrancy and vagabondism.<sup>11</sup> In 1879, authorities moved the remaining few to the larger Aboriginal settlement at La Perouse, a few miles to the south on the shores of Botany Bay.<sup>12</sup>

### **Aboriginal and South Asian**

If Fernando's mother stood for an Aboriginal childhood lost, then the role of his father is even more elusive. Certainly, Fernando never spoke of him to any of his white supporters. At first glance, the surname Fernando suggests that his father was neither Aboriginal nor white, but South Asian. However, 'Fernando' was an adopted name assumed at some point in Anthony Martin Fernando's early adult life. He was already using it in 1903 when he wrote to the Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia. As AM Fernando he would always include the initials of his first and middle name when writing a petition or letter. Anthony and Martin are the names of Roman Catholic saints, as befitting his faith discussed further below. But he seems to have been known to his contemporaries simply as 'Fernando'.

In his conversation with Bennett about the importance of a good mother, Fernando had remarked upon the usefulness of having a good father. Whether or not he had one, Fernando only revealed his father's real name quite late in life. In 1925, when he was nearly sixty, one of the many forms that he was required to complete during his life overseas asked for the names of his parents. He gave these as Mariano and Sarah Silva. According to this document, the father he never mentioned had married his mother and, presumably for a while at least, had created a home with her and their infant son. Sarah is not an unusual Aboriginal woman's name in the nineteenth century and, while Mariano sounds Spanish or Latin American, Silva (like Fernando) points to the legacy of Portuguese colonisation in the South Asian region. Large numbers of de Silvas and Silvas from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) were living in Australia in the nineteenth century—on Thursday Island in the 1880s, for example, or closer to home on Sydney Harbour where, in the 1870s, a Mr Silva was employed as keeper of the Hornby Lighthouse at South Head. Twenty years after Fernando's birth, an Anthony Silva is listed in the postal directory as a Sydney resident.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while possibly related on his mother's side to the fishing people occupying the boatsheds on Sydney

Harbour, Fernando is just as likely to have been living in a small shop at nearby Woolloomooloo where his father and mother worked together.

### **An Australian Black man**

In the earliest surviving document written by Fernando, he declared himself a 'Black man' rather than specifically an Aborigine. Arguably it was a distinction that reflected his interpretation of colour as collectively and historically informed, rather than as governed by the emerging science of 'race'. Growing up in the second half of the nineteenth century, Fernando no doubt saw the world becoming increasingly marked by the strictures of racial categorisation versus the fluidity of living as a man of colour. Self-nomination as Black points also to his identification with a larger community of Black Asian ex-colonial labourers and seamen circulating the globe and in regular contact with portside populations, including in Sydney itself. Their itinerant lives and necessarily transnational outlook made them dynamic figures in world history, as well as fellow ex-colonials making a living in the imperial world of which Australia was a part.<sup>14</sup>

Fernando did not need to leave Australian shores to construct a worldly view of the Black experience. He moved within this diverse and yet internally complex Black world in Australia as well as in Europe. Indians, West Indians and Sri Lankans, as well as smaller numbers of Africans and African-Americans, were as much a part of the population coming and going in Sydney Harbour, and to a lesser extent in outback Australia, as they would be in London or Vienna. From its earliest days, the colony of New South Wales had witnessed the arrival of non-Aboriginal people of colour. A number of these individuals lived among or close by Aboriginal people, with whom they likely shared experiences of colonisation and stories of port cities on the global sailing route.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Aboriginal people had travelled those shipping routes themselves from the earliest days of contact, joining the multi-ethnic diaspora of sailors and navigators who were its primary population.<sup>16</sup>

By far the largest (if mostly transient) population of non-white people in Sydney was the mix of South Asian and African sailors, known as Lascars. Arriving by sail and later steam, some of these men jumped ship, creating a fluid intermixing between resident and transitory portside populations.<sup>17</sup> In the port of Sydney, for example, Lascars were hired to complement local dockworkers including Aborigines, and South Asians were also present in considerable numbers in Australia as the result of indenture.<sup>18</sup> When a Sikh sailor called George Fernando arrived in Sydney nearly twenty years after Fernando was born, he found work as a stone mason and married a Yuwalaray

woman, Ada Woods, with whom he moved to northern New South Wales where a thriving community of Fernandos still continues today.

The historical impact of exchanges between Indian and Aboriginal populations in New South Wales can also be seen in the South Asian origins of two other important figures in Aboriginal history, Thomas and Shadrach James. An Indian from Mauritius who arrived in the late 1870s, Thomas married a Yorta Yorta woman, Ada Cooper, and with his son, Shadrach, became a Methodist preacher and educator at the Cumeragunja Aboriginal community in southern New South Wales.<sup>19</sup> Over the next several decades, the mission produced a generation of political activists, including William Cooper who, during the inter-war years, was a leading voice in Aboriginal activism at the same time as Fernando was protesting halfway around the world. By 1901, approximately 3000 Indian immigrants were living in Australia, mostly labourers and hawkers scattered across the outback.<sup>20</sup> Given the transnational spread of Indian workers across the British Empire, including in Australia, it is hardly surprising that hawking would become one of Fernando's means of survival in London and Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, and it is possible he was engaged in this line of work before he left Australia.

Historian John Maynard has investigated the transnational influences of global Black politics on the formation of Aboriginal politics in early twentieth century Australia. The Coloured Progressive Association that was formed in Sydney in 1903, for instance, comprised African-American, West Indian as well as Aboriginal members, and was openly critical of immigration restriction into White Australia. The network's borrowings from the Pan-African philosophy of African-American activist Marcus Garvey inspired Maynard's own grandfather, Fred Maynard, to form the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in 1924.<sup>21</sup>

Although not himself directly involved in any political organisation, in London and Europe as well as inner Sydney Fernando also moved within a global political landscape influenced by new ideas about colonisation. He too would want to change the ways in which colonial relations were understood and carried out, and from an Aboriginal perspective articulated what he saw as the international implications of settler colonialism in Australia. Part of that perspective was his investment in the shared virtues and political experiences of Aboriginal Australians and South Asians, the Black peoples of what he called Australasia.

According to historian Laura Tabili, 'Black' was used in the early twentieth century by South Asian sailors to denote their collective resistance