

Hidden story behind a portrait

Mike Pickering, Leanne Dempsey and Fiona Paisley

At a recent lunchtime event held in the *From Little Things Big Things Grow* exhibition space, I shared a 'Public Conversation' with Michael Pickering (Head of ATSIP) about my work on the life of Anthony Martin Fernando. Reflecting on the power of Raj Nagi's painting of Fernando hanging in the exhibition, I began by describing the event it depicts: Fernando's remarkable street protest outside Australia House in London during the late 1920s. 'This is all that is left of my people' so Aboriginal protestor Anthony Martin Fernando is said to have advised passers-by, pointing to small toy skeletons — then popular children's novelties — he had dotted on his person. While we know Fernando often lived as a street trader and that toys were among his wares, the use of skeletons in this protest seems likely to refer to reports reaching London at this time of the massacre of Aboriginal people near Forrest River in Central Australia. Even the conservative British newspaper *The Times* could not ignore the damning testimony given at the enquiry into the role of police in the killings, at which some tins containing charred bones of the deceased were tabled as evidence. The toy skeletons stood not only for murder and efforts at cover-up, but for the capacity of the dead to haunt the present.



Given the dramatic nature of his protests, why is Fernando one of the least known of the remarkable Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are featured in the exhibition? One reason is that Fernando, of South Asian and Aboriginal descent and born in Sydney in the 1860s, had already left Australia at the turn of last century — when he was middle-aged. Another is that virtually all his protests took place overseas and hence are recorded mostly in archives in other countries: by the 1910s he was living and working in Europe and, following confinement as a civilian detainee in an Austrian internment camp during the war, had taken his protests for Aboriginal Australia to the streets of Rome and London. Thirdly, at the centre of Fernando's politics was his black identity — his Aboriginality was guided by his mother's memory (she was his 'guiding star'). At the same time, while he was never in contact with his peers in Australia, Fernando shared many of their concerns and aims. He brought a modern Aboriginal perspective not unlike their own to the world of international politics in Europe, taking his call 'in the name of humanity' directly to the streets of London and Rome following the war, as well as through the pages of a Swiss newspaper, and at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park.



One of the diaries kept by Anthony Martin Fernando

Thanks to funding from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, I have been able to complete a comprehensive study of Fernando's life (to be published next year). I draw inspiration from histories that place Australia in transnational and global perspectives, such as those by Devleena Gosh and Heather Goodall in their Indian Oceans project, Regina Ganter in her book *Mixed Relations*, and John Maynard's work on the influence of African-American politics on Aboriginal activism in the early 1920s. This research work has been encouraged by the generosity of Heather Goodall, who first drew my attention to Fernando, and more recently by the response to the award-winning program by Daniel Browning on Radio National's *Away!* Among new findings I uncovered have been three notebooks kept by Fernando in which he described racism in London and his views of world affairs — visitors can see one of these remarkable documents on display in the exhibition *From Little Things Big Things Grow*. Other new material only just surfacing relates to Fernando's picket in St Peter's Square in Rome in 1925; although a devout Catholic, he handed out flyers condemning the Catholic Church as well as the British regime for exploiting the Aboriginal people and for failing to uphold the very standards of 'civilisation' they so often proclaimed.

Another revelation concerns Fernando's name. Born to parents whose surname was Silva, at some stage during the first half of his life, he adopted the name by which we now know him in honour of Italian people with whom he found work several times in his life. This suggests he had already travelled overseas and returned again before his final departure in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, the connection between Aboriginal and South Asian Australian history that inspired Raj Nagi's wonderful painting still applies to Fernando's story: it was the same dynamic flow of populations across the region that brought his parents together nearly 150 years ago.

Fiona Paisley Historian, Griffith University