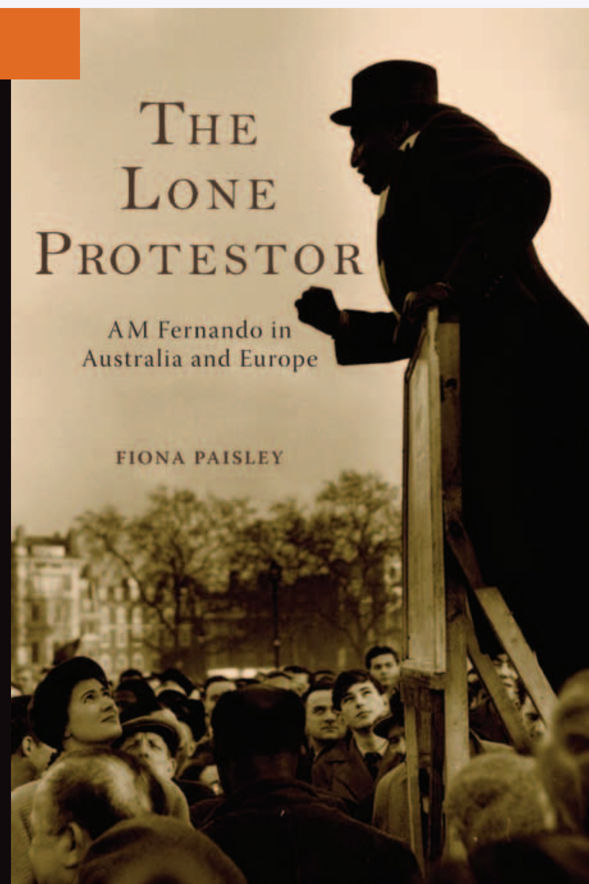
BOOK REVIEW

by Tim Rowse



Perhaps the most important word in the title of this book is 'lone'. We tend to assume that persistently politically active persons are social beings, empowered by being embedded in networks of like-minded fellow activists; we think of political activists as sustained in their causes by their membership of social movements. Not so Anthony Martin Fernando: he was truly a singular figure, very much a loner. He is recognisable as part of a political tradition, to be sure—a tradition of protest about the intrinsic injustice of colonial authority. However, to see him in that way does not supply him with a social milieu. He was a one-man social movement, an eccentric and singular figure, an Aboriginal man who spent most of his adult life in Europe, and part of no community.

Fiona Paisley has done an extraordinary job of piecing together the discontinuous fragments of Fernando's life. To quote her, Fernando was 'a Catholic, an itinerant street trader, a labourer, a manservant and cook, an internee, a prisoner on remand, a hospital patient and a strident commentator on modern affairs'.[1] In several of these realisations of Fernando the attention of various authorities has produced a documentary record of him, so that in each moment of his contact with authority what the authority saw is what we, as readers, are now enabled to see. Paisley's skill as an historian has been to flesh out the contexts of each of these moments of illumination, so that every documented episode in his life is made intelligible as a moment in twentieth century world history. Of all the Australian biographies that I have read, this is the most global in its setting. Among the life histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this one is unique because hardly any of it is set in Australia.

Indeed, to be recognised as 'Aboriginal' outside Australia was not something that Fernando could take for granted. The European and British authorities confronted by this Aboriginal man in exile did not necessarily know what 'an Aborigine' was, unless they were highly educated readers of such ethnographic writings as Walter Baldwin Spencer's. It was Fernando's mission to tell the world—in non-ethnographic terms—what an Aborigine was, to present himself as an intimate witness to his people's fate.

Through lack of evidence, Paisley has not been able to trace the first half of Fernando's life that took place in Australia and that made him into an ardent Catholic; he once dated the start of his political career as 1887, when he was 23, but we do not know what he was doing in 1887 or where he was doing it. Our first certain knowledge of Fernando's activism is that in 1903, while living in the Murchison region of Western Australia, he wrote a letter to the Western Australian Protector complaining of police

brutality and arguing that even the apparently humane Catholic mission of New Norcia was complicit, in its 'protective' management, in the degradation of Aborigines. Concluding that there was no prospect of the rule of law in Australia, Fernando left for Europe in 1903; to the end of his days he lost no opportunity to tell the world that British-Australian authority was hopelessly compromised. He would call repeatedly for an international mandate to be extended over Australian Aborigines.

When World War I broke out, Fernando was living in Trieste, present-day Italy. He was soon interned as an enemy alien by the Austrian Government in the camps Grossau and Katzenau. Assigning him a nationality—so that he could receive food parcels—proved to be a puzzle. This 'negro, born in Australia' (as one document described him) could belong to more than one empire or nation. On this occasion, it was handy to be a subject of Britain: he ended the war with a British passport.

After initially presenting himself as a 'Black man', a transnational category, it became more and more important to Fernando that he be recognised as 'Aboriginal' and to attest his people's suffering. In 1921, while on a seven day trip from Vienna to Bern (Switzerland), he persuaded a Swiss newspaper to publish his call for Australia's Aboriginal reserves to be internationally supervised. He felt the need to explain to his European readers that Aborigines were not 'negros'. About 'negros' he expressed a negative opinion that many of his readers would have shared. On this Swiss occasion, Fernando also objected to the fact that Australian authorities would henceforth rule over former German colonies in Melanesia. Fernando wrote that, from the point of view of black people, the Germans made better colonists than the British-Australians. The Australian Government investigated Fernando, troubled that such 'anti-British' and 'pro-German' views could be expressed by an unknown Australian in Europe.

In 1925, Fernando, now working as a domestic servant in London, travelled to Rome to mount a protest. Catholics from all over the world were gathering for a Jubilee, and Fernando's pamphlet told the faithful that a perverse combination of Irish convicts and Protestant elites was continuing to exterminate Aborigines. Rome had civilised the ancient Britons, he reminded readers, so why wouldn't Britain civilise the Aborigines? The Italian Government arrested Fernando and recognised him as of the 'Australian black race'; they held him for a few weeks then deported him. Fernando worked his way back to London via the south of France.

In the mid and late 1920s, Fernando was living and working in London as a domestic servant; he was also a toy-maker and street vendor whose wares included toy skeletons. Moved by news of recent massacres in the Kimberley and in central Australia, Fernando presented himself to pedestrians outside Australia House. Wearing a coat pinned with his skeletons, he declared: 'this is all that Australia has left of my people'.

As a dark-skinned street vendor, Fernando was not necessarily understood to be Aboriginal. 'Arab', 'Indian' and 'Negro' were more likely London attributions. To be recognised as 'Aboriginal' and as a witness to his people's destruction continued to be one of the aims of his activism. The Australian public learned of Fernando in 1929 when his appearance in court was reported in the London and then the Australian press. What had brought him into the court? Provoked by racial taunts, the sixty-five year old Fernando had assaulted another street vendor in Bethnal Green.

While on remand and while his sanity was being investigated, Fernando was visited by the Australian writer and activist Marie Bennett. Bennett's admiring accounts of Fernando in subsequent letters and in a 1964 interview have helped to shape Fernando's reputation. It is not difficult to imagine a less sympathetic observation of Fernando at this stage of his life. Fernando did not welcome Bennett's solicitude and she could well have characterised him as an embittered crank, a man deranged by his lonely precarious exile, obsessively recounting the worst incidents of Australia's past as if they were the essence of Australia's character. Marie Bennett's belief in Fernando laid the foundation for Paisley's admiring and much more ample account. She describes Fernando's eloquent self-presentation at the Old Bailey in 1929 as: among the great moments in twentieth century Aboriginal and Australian history. No other Aboriginal person of his generation was able to use the court system in this way to publicise their views on colonisation to audiences in England and Australia.[2]

Paisley describes Fernando as a promoter of 'the Aboriginal cause'. What was 'the Aboriginal cause' in the first four decades of the twentieth century? Certainly, Fernando was a vehement critic of British colonial authority. What he wanted for Australian Aborigines was that they should be given the opportunity to acquire the blessings of modern civilisation. For this to be possible, Australia's management of Indigenous Australians would have to come under international supervision. At least, that was one idea that Fernando promoted. It

would appear that Fernando did not correspond with his Aboriginal contemporaries back in Australia. Thus it is not clear what, if anything, he knew of the first stirrings of Aboriginal political activism by figures such as Fred Maynard. And Aboriginal activists in Australia seem to have been unaware of what he was saying—in Europe and Britain—about them. One question that Paisley's book raises for me is whether being militantly anti-British limited Fernando's political ideology. Anti-colonial ideologies need to be able to present an account of the past, present and future of the colonised. Fernando's life experience had certainly nourished his critical account of Australia's past, but it is not so clear that Fernando could present a vision of Aborigines' future under British-Australian authority, other than a demand that the British be obliged to pass on the blessings of civilisation to Aborigines.

While making the case for Fernando as a neglected progressive intellectual for the Aboriginal cause, Paisley admits to having some doubts and reservations. It is difficult on the scanty available evidence to know whether Fernando's speeches at Hyde Park Corner around 1930 came across as impressively passionate and poetic or as the ravings of 'someone driven over the edge by the burden of his self-appointed task'.[3] Paisley has read Fernando's notebooks from this part of his life. In them:

> he interwove grand narratives concerning an avenging God with an analysis of human history. The result is a strangely compelling interior universe, at times so distilled and self-referential that it can be difficult to decode.[4]

Anti-Semitism was a prominent Fernando theme—consistent with his Christian upbringing and ensuring that he remained 'remarkably in tune with the British worldview'.[5]

Perhaps the unifying intellectual and emotional quality within this complicated, contradictory and singular character is Fernando's persistent moral disgust—about Australia, about London as a cesspool of degenerate peoples, about British Imperialism, and about races that stood lower than the Aborigines, about the perversity of human history. Paisley's account of Fernando's late-in-life notebooks reveals a mind stocked with the Old Testament's most lurid and violent stories and images. Fernando's evocation of Australia as a scene of horror penetrates to a truth that we Australians have only recently learned to acknowledge, yet his horrified certainty about the rottenness of our history also distances Fernando from us, from our persistent, comforting underlying presumption that the world can be made better by collective action. Paisley's study of Anthony Martin Fernando evokes the difficulty—if not the futility—of being a 'lone protestor'.

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1 Fiona Paisley, *The Lone Protestor: AM Fernando in Australia and Europe* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012) xvii.

2 Ibid 140.

3 Ibid 142.

4 Ibid 143.

5 Ibid 152.

Towards Justice
Jessica Birk