

William "Bill" Ferguson (1882 - 1950)

William was born the second of seven children of William Ferguson, a Scottish shearer, and his wife Emily (nee Ford), an Aboriginal housemaid. He grew up in the vicinity of the Warangesda Mission near Griffith, briefly attending the school there. Leaving school at fourteen, he joined his father as a shearer, travelling from property to property. This gave the young William the opportunity to see how Aborigines were being treated.

In 1911 he married Margaret Gowans, who was also of Scottish / Aboriginal parentage. They formed a close bond and had 12 children. Margaret also edited his speeches as he became more active in politics.

The Ferguson family lived in various towns in western NSW but from 1924 began spending longer periods in Dubbo. They settled here permanently in 1933.

Ferguson was a staunch Presbyterian and became a highly respected elder of the Dubbo Presbyterian Church. Politically, Ferguson was an active member of the Australian Workers Union and joined the Labor Party in 1915. He was motivated by the terrible working conditions for those on the land. This included both white and aboriginal workers.

He was particularly angered in 1923 when the Aborigines' Protection Board began to remove children from their Aboriginal parents. He tried to limit the Board's powers for years. When the Board's powers were increased in 1936 he was stunned. He realised that the Aboriginal people's only hope was to have an Aboriginal voice in the government.

So on 27 June 1937 at Dubbo he launched the Aborigines' Progressive Association. Then, together with Jack Patten and William Cooper, Ferguson organised the Day of Mourning on the 150th Australia Day in 1938. This highlighted the impact of white settlement on the Aboriginal population. Shortly afterwards, Ferguson and Patten wrote the pamphlet Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights !

In 1949, Ferguson became vice-president of the Australian Aborigines' League. In June of that year the League sent a group to Canberra. They were seeking changes to the Aboriginal agenda of the Chifley Labor government. Their suggestions were swiftly rejected. In protest Ferguson resigned for the Labor Party.

In that year's Federal election Ferguson stood as an Independent for the seat of Lawson, which included the town of Dubbo. His platform was based upon the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. He called for civil rights for all people and stressed the importance of self-determination.

He collapsed after giving a speech at the Masonic Hall in Dubbo days before the vote. He was taken to Dubbo Base Hospital where he died on 4 Jan 1950.

Officially unveiled by :

The Honourable Dugald Saunders, MP Member for Dubbo
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