



## Colleen Shirley Smith, MBE, AM, 1928-98

Colleen Shirley Smith, or 'Mum Shirl' as she was known across Australia, died on 28 April 1998 in Sydney. Born on Erambie government reserve, New South Wales on 25 November 1928, she was one of nine children born to Isabelle and Joseph Perry. She attended the reserve school conducted by Roman Catholic sisters.<sup>1</sup> It was this Catholic school which shaped her life, allowing her to exercise her maternal instincts in a powerful way on behalf of her immediate, extended and institutional community, which she assumed was her family. But Shirley was a woman of her time in that she came from a government institution with large permanent populations of women and children: reserves were largely creches where Aboriginal men came and went as a surplus rural workforce. Shirley's early pattern of life reflected both the growth of the Catholic church as a rural institution caring for Aborigines, and that of Aboriginal women following their casual-working male partners around NSW. Then she became liberated from government legislative subjugation in 1968, commencing a new phase of life coping with urban culture.<sup>2</sup>

In caring for Aborigines in NSW, the Catholic church was a newcomer. Its colonial role focused attention on Irish migrants or their offspring.<sup>3</sup> Aborigines featured on a small scale in the church's drive to religious pastoral work. In the larger towns, Catholic establishments emerged after World War I and it was during this time that they began taking Aboriginal orphans, fringe-camp and reserve children into their schools. In some places where Aborigines lived in numbers, and were prevented from attending town schools, the church contracted with the Aboriginal Welfare Board (AWB) to operate schools. Cowra and Erambie government reserve was such a place and Mum Shirl emerged out of these circumstances.

In the 1930s a gradual migration of people of Aboriginal descent reflected concerted attempts to escape legislative subjugation from the then infamous *Aborigines Pro-*

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1. Hereafter referred to as Catholic rather than Roman Catholic.

2. The *Aborigines Protection Act*, administered by the Aboriginal Welfare Board, was repealed in 1968, but as race law control loosened so other child welfare laws tightened. This meant almost no change as Shirley now attended the Children's Courts at YASMA and Darlinghurst and the Central and Darlinghurst Courts when her friends and relatives were in conflict with general laws. The urban culture crashed in on all new Aboriginal migrant families perplexed about their new social circumstances and puzzled about matters as simple as where to go, what to do and how to do it.

3. See C.M.H. Clark, *A History Of Australia*, vol. I, pp. 93-4, but see also, vols. II to V, Melbourne University Press, 1962-1981.

tection Act<sup>4</sup> by gaining 'exemptions' from the Act, or exempting themselves by moving to Sydney from the Riverina region.<sup>5</sup> The latter area had been settled by white, mostly Scottish and English, sheep and wheat farmers, in the 1830s. By the 1850s they had well-established Aboriginal labour forces. Aborigines from this area were the first to move to urban areas after WWII. In 1930 Shirley's parents moved from Erambie closer to Cowra; Erambie was a reserve 'too far from town'. She moved to Sydney in the 1950s and had a family of her own. In the same decade she moved back to Erambie to care for her sisters' families while they took on casual work around NSW during the post-war boom. In the early 1960s Shirley returned to Sydney to help care for the family of her nephew, Patrick Wedge, who had been shot by police at the Petersham Railway Station. Meanwhile, Shirley's own children were removed to AWB custody—the girls to Cootamundra; the boys to Kinchela.<sup>6</sup> Through her own efforts she eventually regained the custody of her children. Soon after, Shirl's brother, Laurie (the Bat) Perry, was gaoled for a series of offences and she acted as a carer of his children. Following her own contact with the AWB, she arranged for her brother's family to be allocated an AWB house near Newcastle. All the while, Shirley gained valuable skills attending to her own affairs and dealing with the government. She put these skills to good use in visiting children and adults of her own volition, or on behalf of other acquaintances and relatives.

Shirley was a member of a small number of disparate Aborigines who moved, after WWII, from camp conditions in the La Perouse sand-hills (known as 'Frogs Hollow') into temporary government accommodation at the abandoned military barracks of both Kensington and Kingswood. In 1968 this group numbered no more than 1,000 people, but increased following Aboriginal people's emancipation from the infamous AP Act by the Askin Government in 1968, triggering a huge rural exodus across NSW.<sup>7</sup> There followed a period of urban cultural adaptation to police, the law, housing, child care, education, health and housing. Aborigines experienced confusion both in Blacktown and the slums of Sydney. These people were migrant Aboriginal families and individuals seeking a better life in the city. Such circumstances suited Shirley's skills. She involved herself in the activities of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (FAA)—a welfare centre in Sydney Haymarket. She learned to use other charities such as Matthew Talbot's and St Vincent De Paul's for clothing and food. Shirley thereby became well known to Aborigines and to whites as someone to be contacted when either charity was needed or disaster emerged; whether in the city or rural towns of NSW.

I was a student at the Sydney Technical College when I first met Mum Shirl in 1966. Shirl participated in the FAA auxiliary with Flo Grant, Ruth and Herb Simms and others who helped at the FAA fetes. In 1970 I was a member of the Aboriginal Legal Service Council. This council, formed through pushing by young Aboriginal migrants to Sydney, was supported by lawyers such as Hal Wootton, Bob Debus, Gordon Samu-

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4. See Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom: A Biography*, ANZ Book Co., NSW, 1974.
  5. See C.D. Rowley, *Outcasts In White Australia: Aboriginal Policy and Practice*, vol. II, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1971, pp. 41–61, 107–30, 232–4, 383–5, 390–401.
  6. Ian Howie-Willis, 'Kinchela Home', in D. Horton, *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994, pp. 548–51.
  7. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–85; see also, W.D. Scott and Company, *The Problems and needs of the Aboriginal of Sydney, a report to the Minister for Youth and Community Affairs*, NSW Government Printer, Sydney, 1973.

els, David Isaacs, the late Paul Landa and Garth Nettheim. Its radicals were people such as the Jewish lawyers, intellectuals and students, among whom were Bob Debus, Peter Tobin, Eddy Newman, Paul Torsillo, Ross McKenna and Peter Thompson, and Aborigines such as Paul Coe (Mum Shirl's nephew), Garry Foley and Garry Williams. Aborigines who migrated to Sydney in the late-1960s and early 70s brought with them a rural reserve and fringe-camp culture. Having only just been shaken free of government control as a rural population, this brought them face-to-face with city police. Determined to oppose police control, they imagined that a legal defence was possible against 'white colonial oppression'. When the ALS commenced I was appointed field officer and David Collins the first solicitor.

Mum Shirl's relationship with me developed quickly. She gave the Redfern ALS an authenticity among local Aborigines that the FAA lacked, and so the service widened in popularity in NSW and beyond. Other community needs emerged and Mum Shirl supported me in my efforts to develop a 'free' Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS). On this matter I called a public meeting at the South Sydney Community Aid Office. Those who attended were myself, Mum Shirl, John Russell, Ross McKenna, Dulcy Flowers, Leonard Smith, Fred Hollows.<sup>8</sup> Shirl was instrumental in raising funds and interest among the Catholic population for support. Fathers Ted Kennedy and Frank Brennan were later to link that support to the AMS. I left Redfern to return to my home in Alice Springs in late-1972 but my friendship with Mum Shirl continued. Soon after I was one of the demonstrators who saw her become a national icon by standing with Stuart Harris (the journalist) between the demonstrators and the police at the Canberra tent embassy. They formed a human barricade endeavouring to stop Commonwealth police from demolishing the embassy on the orders of William McMahon's coalition government. In later years she was also instrumental in planning Pope John Paul's two visits. By then she had gained official recognition, her honours and awards including an MBE, an AM and appointment as a special commissioner for NSW Corrective Services. With Mum Shirl's passing, Aboriginal Australians have lost a wonderful leader and the Catholic Church a gracious ambassador.

Gordon Briscoe

8. G. Briscoe, 'An Aboriginal Model', in B. Hetzel, M. Dobbin, L. Lipmann and E. Eggleston (eds.), *Better Health for Aborigines?*, University of Queensland Press, 1974.