

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0092

MumShirl

(1924 - 1998)

Born 1 January, 1924, Erambie Mission, West Cowra New South Wales Australia

Died 28 April, 1998

Occupation Community worker

Summary

MumShirl was an Aboriginal woman who dedicated her life to welfare services. She visited countless Aboriginal prisoners in jail and raised 60 foster children. She was nominated a Member of the British Empire and Member of the Order of Australia for her work.

Details

A Wiradjuri woman, MumShirl was born Colleen Shirley Perry on Erambie Mission, West Cowra, New South Wales, around 1924. Her married name was Shirley Smith.

MumShirl wrote about her life and work with Aboriginal people in her book *MumShirl: an autobiography*. Her welfare work began with visits to Aboriginal people in jail, a commitment that was eventually recognised and facilitated by the provision of a pass by the Department of Corrective Services (New South Wales). Her support for prisoners earned her the nickname 'MumShirl'. During her life she also raised over 60 children in need of a parent. MumShirl was involved in supporting the Gurindji land rights claim and in establishing the Aboriginal Legal Service (1971), the Aboriginal Medical Service (1972), the Aboriginal Black Theatre, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the Aboriginal Children's service, the Aboriginal Housing Company and the Detoxification Centre. She worked with the Aboriginal Medical Service for many years.

In her autobiography, MumShirl recalls the day she attended the ceremony to collect her MBE medal, 11 June 1977 (her citation name was Mrs Shirley Colleen Smith). She had been nominated to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire (Civil) (and in 1985 a Member of the Order of Australia) for services to Aboriginal people. In her words:

'I never did find out who nominated me, and I didn't really know whether I ought to take it, or really what it would mean to me, but I asked around and the people I spoke to all urged me to take it... I received my citation and I felt very strange. As it was getting close to my turn, it was flashing into my mind the numbers of places where I couldn't get served; how I had had to sit on the ground at the front of the picture theatre as a child in the roped off section that Blacks had to sit in, white kids in Cowra running after us yelling, 'Nigger, nigger pull the trigger', the camps and shacks that Blacks were having to live in all over this country that was, after all, ours – and here I was, standing up here with all these well-dressed and fashionable people, waiting in turn to collect this medal which would make me a Member of the British Empire.'

The ironies of the prestigious accolade were clear to MumShirl as she resumed her day to day struggle after the ceremony. Later the Department of Corrective Services revoked her pass, making her prisoner support work near impossible. She wrote, 'the many honours that I had received over the years, and even the MBE which I had worked for and earned, none of these things could help me now. I could hardly go about my work, but I drove myself on.' Of the many 'medals and pieces of paper' that have been awarded to MumShirl she asks in the final sentence of her book, 'They must be worth something in the end, mustn't they?'

Published resources

Book Section

Aboriginal women, Richards, Michaela, 1988

Book

MumShirl : an autobiography - with the assistance of Bobbi Sykes, MumShirl, 1981

Livewire Real Lives: Mum Shirl, Gordon, Janet, 1999

Stories of herself when young : autobiographies of childhood by Australian women, Hooton, Joy W. (Joy Wendy), 1935-, 1990

Resource Section

Mum Shirl, ATSIC News, 1998,
<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/heroes5.html>

Tribute to Mum Shirl, Deane, Sir William; Kennedy, Fr Ted, 2000,
<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~wfnev/mar01deanekennedy.htm>

MumShirl, 1999,
<http://www.ozco.gov.au/atsia/yarnup/pdfs/win99/mum.pdf>

Edited Book

The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia : Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture, Horton, David, 1994

Journal Article

The History of the Aboriginal Medical Service, Foley, Gary, 1975

Newspaper Article

Smoke Signals (Stories from Shirley Smith), 1972

From the inside. Aboriginal prisoners need cultural, general education., Clevans, Michael; Lithgow Correctional Centre, 1992

20th anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 1992

Mourners bid a fond farewell to Mum Shirl. NSW, 1998

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[On their own terms : profiles of five very individual Australians / prepared by Tim Bowden and Ros Bowden](#)

[Colin Davis interviewed by Rob Willis in the Bringing them home oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Edna Ryan, 1948-1993 \[manuscript\]](#)

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection

[Ros Bowden - interviews conducted for radio programs and documentaries, ca.1975 - 1989](#)

Author Details

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Created 3 September 2002

Last modified 16 September 2013