Aboriginal Resistance - Women

Shirley Smith (1924 to 1998)

Source: National Library of Australia

Shirley Smith, affectionately known as 'MumShirl', has been variously described as both a hero and a saint. A Wiradjuri woman, she was born Colleen Shirley Perry in about 1924 on the Erambie Mission near Cowra, and grew up with her grandparents. She shared an especially close relationship with her grandfather and, even after his death, often looked to him as a source of spiritual and emotional strength. She began her lifelong welfare work after her brother's imprisonment, when she realised that many of his fellow inmates had no visitors, nor anybody with whom they could discuss their problems. Initially at her brother's suggestion, she began to visit other prisoners in the gaol and, later, began to extend her visits to other gaols in New South Wales. Eventually, the Department of Corrective Services allowed her access to all its prisoners. She earned the nickname 'MumShirl' through her visits to the inmates. It reflected both the affection and the regard in which they held her.

It was the same outside the prison system. Her voluntary efforts for prisoners, both black and white, soon led to her offering assistance to Aboriginal people around Sydney. She often found shelter, food and friendship for those recently arrived in the city, and worked tirelessly for the vulnerable, especially children, single mothers, the destitute, the homeless and the alcoholics. Many of these people would find a home with her and, over the years, she took in over 60 children. In her autobiography, she remarked that her life was sometimes a lonely one. But her capacity to ease the difficulties of other people's lives, and her willingness to give much of her own time (and often, her own money) to assist those in need meant that she was often sought out by Indigenous people from all over New South Wales and sometimes, further afield.

MumShirl's life was her work. She lived and worked among the people she helped, and often suffered her own problems of poverty as a consequence. Although she had a number of allies who strove to assist her welfare efforts, she drew her greatest strength from God, developing close relationships with a number of Catholic priests and nuns in the process.

Apart from these enormous contributions to the Aboriginal community, MumShirl was also influential in land rights struggles, including the Aboriginal Embassy, the Aboriginal Legal Service, a detoxification centre at Wiseman's Ferry, and Aboriginal housing issues. In particular, she is well remembered for her role in helping to found the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, where she was later employed and continued her valuable community work.

MumShirl was awarded an MBE in 1977 for services to the Aboriginal community and an AM in 1985. She died in 1998, aged 73.

Further reading

Shirley Smith, *MumShirl: An Autobiography / With the Assistance of Bobbi Sykes*, Mammoth, Port Melbourne, 1992

https://indigenousrights.net.au/people/pagination/shirley_smith

http://ia.anu.edu.au/biography/smith-shirley-coleen-mum-shirl-17817

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920 – 1993)

Oodgeroo Nunuccal, photo courtesy University of Queensland Press

Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal, known until 1988 as Kath Walker, was born Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska on 3 November 1920, on North Stradbroke Island in South-East Queensland, one of seven children of Edward (Ted) Ruska and his wife Lucy (née McCulloch). Her father, who belonged to the Noonuccal people, the traditional inhabitants of Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), was employed by the Queensland government as part of a poorly-paid Aboriginal workforce; his campaigning for better conditions for Aboriginal workers left a strong impression on his daughter. She attended Dunwich State School until 1933, when, at the age of 13, she left to take up work as a domestic servant in Brisbane. Working for a number of different families in the 1930s, she was paid poorly but remained in domestic service because of the strong prejudices against and lack of opportunities open to Aboriginal women. In 1941 she enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS), earning promotion to corporal and working in switchboard operations and later in the AWAS pay office.

In 1942, she married Bruce Raymond Walker, a member of the Gugingin (Logan) people and a childhood friend. The newly-married Kath Walker was invalided from the AWAS in 1943, after a serious ear infection left her with partial hearing loss, but she was able to train in

secretarial and bookkeeping skills at Brisbane Commercial College under the army's rehabilitation scheme. With the help of friends, the Walkers were able to purchase a house in Buranda, and Kath found a job with a smallgoods manufacturer at Murrarie in Brisbane's eastern suburbs. Around this time, the couple also grew interested in politics, and became involved in the Communist Party of Australia—the only political party in Australian that did not support the White Australia policy at this time. By the time their son Denis was born in 1946, the couple had separated, and Kath Walker was forced to raise their son and maintain the household on her own. After her son began experiencing difficulties at school, Walker was forced to return to domestic service, working in the household of two prominent medical doctors, Sir Raphael and Lady Phyllis Cilento. In 1953, she gave birth to a second son, Vivian (later Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal), the child of the Cilentos' son Raphael junior.

In the 1950s, Walker became interested in writing poetry. By the late 1950s she had joined the Brisbane arm of the Realist Writer's Group, and some of her earliest poems appeared in the group's magazine, *Realist Writer* (later *The Realist*). In 1963, encouraged by her contacts in the Realist Writers Group, she submitted a manuscript collection of poems to Brisbane publisher Jacaranda Press. After a recommendation from Jacaranda's poetry reader, Judith Wright, the collection was published in 1964 as *We Are Going* . The work was an immediate commercial success, selling more than ten thousand copies and making Walker the best-selling Australian poet since C. J. Dennis. The plain-speaking style of her poetry, and the strong element of protest in it, precluded literary acclaim for her work, but the role of a political 'protest poet' was one in which Walker would come to revel. Her second poetry collection, *The Dawn is at Hand* , was published by Jacaranda in 1966. A third collection, *My People: A Kath Walker Collection* (1970, rev. eds. 1981, 1990) incorporated the content of the first two collections, and in later editions added new poems and essays.

During the 1960s, at the same time as developing her reputation as a poet, Walker became increasingly engaged in political activism in support of Aboriginal rights, social justice, and conservationism. Through friends she became involved in the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI) and came to play an important role in the national organisation, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). The FCAATSI played a leading role in the agitation that led to voting rights (in 1965) and Australian citizenship (in 1967) for Aborigines. In 1968, she moved to Holland Park, and the following year unsuccessfully stood as the ALP candidate in her local (state) electorate of Greenslopes. In 1969, she was invited to attend the World Council of Churches' Consultation on Racism in London. The event was a pivotal moment for Walker; she returned to Australia convinced of the need for Aboriginal activists to work within their own political organisations rather than white-dominated ones. At the end of the 1960s, she left the QCAATSI and the FCAATSI for the newly formed Brisbane Aboriginal and Islanders Council and the National Tribal Council (NTC), of which she was briefly chairperson. Power struggles within the Brisbane Council led Walker to leave the organisation in 1971 and return to her ancestral home of North Stradbroke Island.

While she was assumed to have withdrawn from public life, Walker had in fact entered a new phase of her career where she assumed the role of educator and cultural guardian and ambassador for her people. After some opposition from the Queensland government, she established the Noonuccal-Nughie Education and Cultural Centre at Moongalba, near Amity Point on Stradbroke Island. The Centre became an important venue for visiting Aboriginal students from around the country. Walker also travelled widely in the 1970s, going on

lecture tours around Australia and overseas, living through a hijacking on a return flight from Nigeria in 1974. In 1978, she was poet-in-residence at Bloomsburg State College, in Pennsylvania, USA, and visited a number of other US Colleges. Walker continued to write and publish, her work now largely reflecting her career as an educator. She published a number of books of Aboriginal legends aimed at young readers, including *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972), *Father Sky and Mother Earth* (1981), *The Rainbow Serpent* (1988), *Legends of Our Land*(1990), and *Australia's Unwritten History: More Legends of Our Land* (1992). In 1982, she was awarded the FAW Christopher Brennan award for her contribution to Australian literature. In 1984, she visited China as part of an Australian cultural delegation, the trip providing the inspiration for her fourth and final poetry collection, *Kath Walker in China* (1988).

In 1988, as a protest against continuing Aboriginal disadvantage during the Bicentennial Celebration of White Australia, Walker returned the MBE she had been awarded in 1970, and subsequently adopted the Noonuccal tribal name Oodgeroo (meaning "paperbark"). Recognition of her literary, educational and political achievements continued to flow, however; she was awarded honorary doctorates from Macquarie University (1988), Griffith University (1989), Monash University (1991), and Queensland University of Technology (1992). In 1990, after the formation of the Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), she was elected a member of the Southeast Queensland Regional Council. Oodgeroo died at her home on Stradbroke Island on 16 September 1993. Her distinctive and pioneering poetry was part of a literary legacy that went hand in hand with her political life.

https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/noonuccal-oodgeroo

Roberta "Bobbi" Sykes (1943 – 2010)

Dr Roberta Sykes, a self-described chameleon who defied conventions to become a well-known activist for indigenous rights as well as a poet and author of renown, died at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney after failing to recover from a stroke suffered eight years ago. She was 67.

Widely known as Bobbi Sykes in her early activist days, she was the first black Australian to attend Harvard University in the US. She graduated in the 1980s with a doctorate in education.

She was awarded the prestigious university's highest academic award, which usually goes to students from the schools of law or medicine and taught there briefly. Advertisement: Story continues below

Sykes went on to be awarded the Australian Human Rights Medal in 1994 for her tireless work in advocating for the civil and political rights of indigenous Australians.

She first became an activist in the lead-up to the landmark 1967 referendum that proposed to include Aboriginal people in the national census and to allow the federal government to make laws for Aboriginal people.

However, it wasn't until she moved to Sydney in the early 1970s that she became deeply involved in the emerging ''black power'' movement and in 1972 was one of the founders of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of old Parliament House in Canberra.

She became the first secretary at the embassy and was among those protesters arrested. Sykes's activism led ASIO to regard her as a threat to national security and spooks kept close track of her. It can now be revealed that a Sydney academic who has prepared a bibliography - she authored 10 books, among them two on poetry - was given access to three volumes of information collected on Sykes by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

Ironically, for a time her work in this sphere attracted criticism from some Aboriginal leaders, who felt aggrieved that she had used the Aboriginal snake motif in her acclaimed autobiographical trilogy, Snake Dreaming - made up of Snake Cradle (1997), Snake Dancing (1998) and Snake Circle (2000) - when she was not an Aboriginal.

But Sykes identified fully with indigenous people and causes, subjected as she was to racism while growing up in north Queensland - including its most vile form.

At age 17, she was pack-raped by four white men, one of whom shouted as he was being sentenced to jail: ''What the hell, she's just an Abo; she's just a f---ing boong.''

Born Roberta Barkley Patterson in Townsville, she was raised by her mother, Rachel Patterson, who made sure the rapists were brought to trial. While her daughter claimed not to know anything about her father, Rachel revealed he was an African-American soldier, Robert Barkley, a master-sergeant in the US Army during World War II.

Sykes left school at age 14 and worked as a shop assistant and then nurse's assistant in Townsville before moving to Brisbane. Another move followed, to Sydney in the mid-1960s, where she took the stage name Opal Stone and performed as a striptease dancer at the Pink Pussycat nightclub in Kings Cross.

At about this time she met an English migrant, Howard Sykes, a house painter, and they married. She already had a son, Russel, who was born when she was 17; a daughter, Naomi, was born during the marriage, which ended in 1971.

Sykes's private life was complex: on the one hand she easily made numerous enduring friends, yet this wasn't reflected in the partners she chose over the years.

She began writing in the 1970s and in a 10-year period as a freelance writer, contributed many more articles on Aboriginal disadvantage and indigenous politics to various outlets, as well as film reviews and poetry.

She also worked as the education and publicity officer for the newly established Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. From 1975 to 1980, Sykes was an adviser on Aboriginal health and education to the NSW Health Commission and her first book of poetry, Love Poems and Other Revolutionary Acts, was published in 1979.

In 1981, she ghosted the award-winning autobiography of well-known NSW indigenous social worker, Mum (Shirl) Smith. That year, aged 38, Sykes went off to Harvard with her young daughter in tow and completed her master's degree in a year, followed by a PhD in Aboriginal education in a further two years. Her son Russel, now a psychologist, initially stayed in Sydney and looked after the family home but then joined his mother at Harvard, where he, too, studied for a year.

She returned to Australia from Harvard determined to create more educational opportunities for others and devoted herself to being a proactive voice for indigenous Australians.

Despite her achievement at Harvard, which considered her worthy of an academic appointment, she found it difficult to attract a similar appointment in Australia until she gained a creative writing appointment at Macquarie University. She went on to be a consultant to several government departments, including the NSW Department of Corrective Services and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Sykes's honesty, bravery, charm and charisma touched many. One of these, David Bardas, the former owner of the Sportsgirl stores, has offered to commission a portrait of Sykes to be hung in the National Portrait Gallery to honour her place in Australian history.

Bardas's late wife, Sandra (nee Smorgon), also an early member of the Black Women's Action in Education Foundation, befriended Sykes in the 1970s.

Together they were involved in the Greenhill's Foundation op-shop and, with the late Hyllus Maris, encouraged the founding of Worawa Aboriginal College, Victoria's only independent institution for indigenous education.

Bardas recalled visiting Sykes on the campus at Harvard: ''We were staying at the nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel and Bobbi thought it was very funny when we were refused entry to the bar, because Sandra was wearing jeans and not because she [Sykes] was an unwelcome black woman.''

Sykes suffered a stroke at her unit in Redfern in November 2002 but was not found until the next day, when she failed to make an appointment.

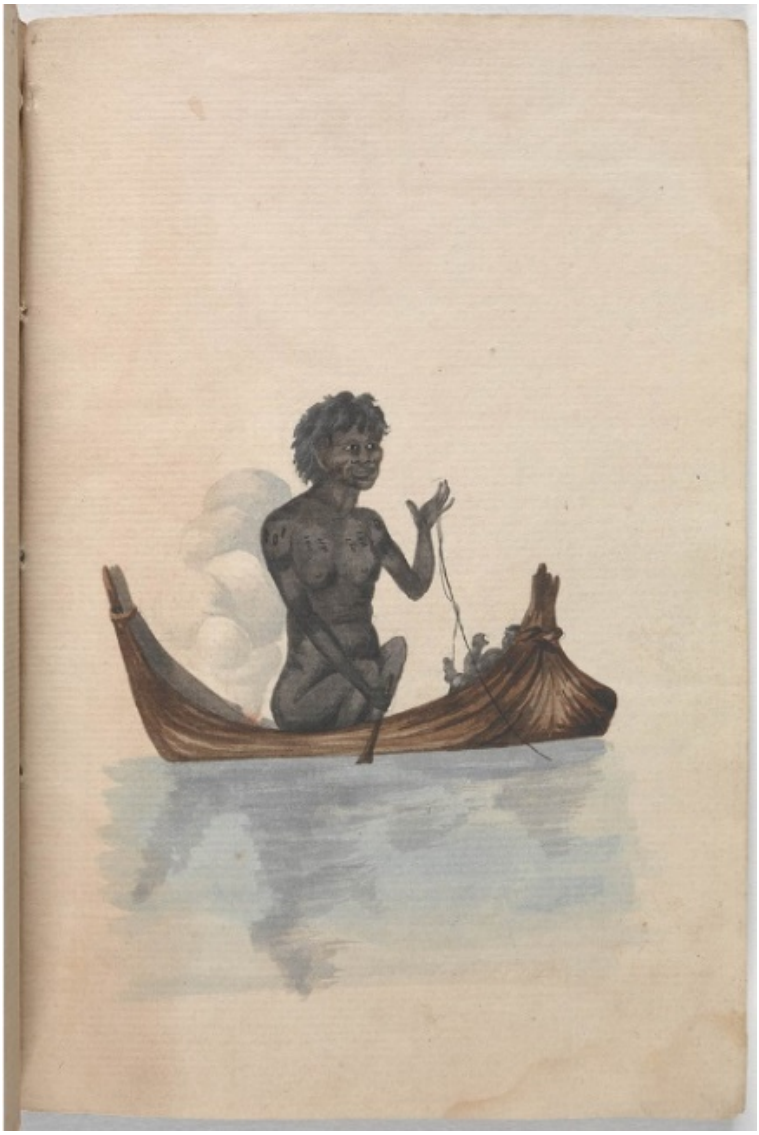
Her son, Russel, said she was immensely frustrated to be left paralysed on one side and unable to walk.

She is survived by Russel, daughter Naomi and grandchildren Lauren, Mason and Chez.

by **Gerry Carman**
Sydney Morning Herald, November 19, 2010

http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/heroes/biogs/roberta_sykes.html

Barangaroo and the Eora fisherwomen



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8vHWKeUYJE

Eora fisherwomen

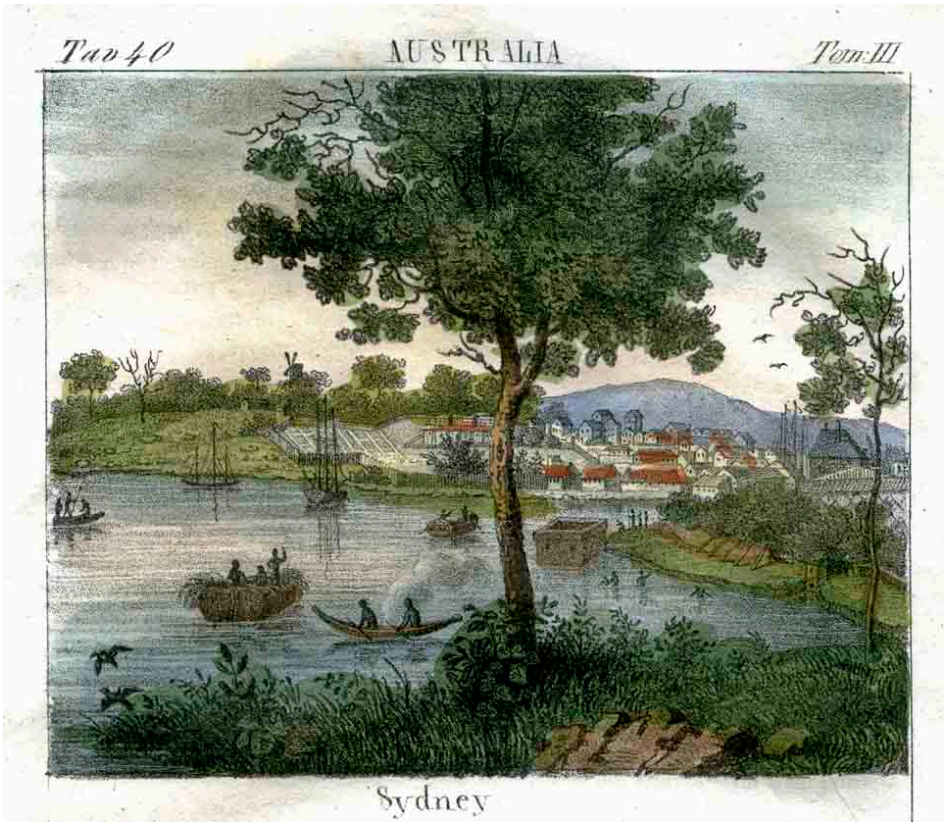
Barangaroo was a fisherwoman. Eora women like her were the main food providers for their families, and the staple food source of the coastal people around Sydney was fish. Unlike men, who stood motionless in the shore and speared fish with multi-pronged spears, or fish-gigs (*callarr* and *mooting*), the women fished from their bark canoes (*nowie*) with lines and hooks. They made their fishing lines (*carr-e-jun*) by twisting together two strands of fibre from kurrajong trees, cabbage trees or flax plants. Animal fur and grass 'nearly as fine as raw silk' were also used to make lines. One observer described them as 'nicely shredded and twisted very close and neatly'. The distinctively crescent-shaped fish hooks (*burra*) were honed from the broadest part of the turban shell (*Turbo torquata*).

These hooks were beautiful, and the lines well-made – First Fleet Surgeon George Worgan thought that they showed 'the greatest ingenuity' of all the Eora implements. Sometimes the women wore them around their necks like a necklace. But they were not decorative objects. They were Eora women's working tools and implements, essential for survival, and closely associated with their identities and power. The British officers quickly learned to respect the value of women's fishing gear – these were not female frippery, 'trifling things in a fishing way', but serious and important, like men's spears and clubs. The officers started collecting the hooks as well as spears and fish-gigs. Convicts caught stealing fishing tackle were severely punished.

Eora women's skills in fishing, swimming, diving and canoeing were extraordinary. The women skimmed the waters in their simple bark canoes with fires lit on clay pads for warmth and cooking. The officers were fascinated; they wondered how on earth the women could manage these 'contemptible skiffs', fishing tackle, onboard fire, small children and babies at the breast, in surf that would terrify their toughest sailors.

The women sang together as they fished and kept time with their paddles as they rowed. They were seen fishing all day, in all weathers, and at night too. Eora women dominated the waters of the harbours, coves and bays, and the coastlines in between. The men mostly only used canoes when they wanted to get from one cove to another.

Eora children grew up on the water from their youngest days, and the swell of the waves and rocking *nowie* must have been just as familiar to them as the solidity of the earth or their mothers' heartbeat. The girls learned to line-fish as they grew – learning the fishing places and songs, how to burley with chewed cockle, how to lure and snag a fish, how to hone their *burra* from the cheek of a turban shell.



Eora women's control of the food supply would have been essential to their status and self-esteem, as well as their power in society. So, what may have triggered Barangaroo's anger on first meeting the whites was fish. This meeting, on the north shore at Kirribilli in November 1790, coincided with a massive catch of 4,000 Australian salmon, hauled up in two nets. Forty fish of five pounds (0.5 kilos) each were sent as a present over to Bennelong's group.

Two hundred pounds (91 kilos) of fish may well have been far more than the small group could eat – an extravagant, wasteful gift, given from men to men. As an Eora fisherwoman, winning fish one-by-one through skill and patience, Barangaroo may have felt insulted.

There were ominous implications too: future alliances with these food-bearing whites meant that women would lose their control over the food supply. Barangaroo must have observed the way the whites dealt with Eora men, not women. Living with them, relying on their food, plainly meant dependence on men, white and black.

Yet Bennelong's group did come in to Sydney at the end of 1790. Governor Phillip and the officers were relieved and delighted – though they remained wary and a bit scared of Barangaroo.

Barangaroo had a baby girl in 1791. Bennelong pressured her to give birth at government house – the child would then belong to this new country, Sydney. But Barangaroo refused. She gave birth alone, somewhere in the bush on the edge of the town. David Collins came quietly to see her afterwards and was astonished to see her 'walking about alone, picking up sticks to mend her fire', the tiny reddish infant lying on soft bark on the ground.

But she did not live long after the birth. The officers were silent on why she died. She was cremated, with her fishing gear beside her, in a small ceremony. Bennelong buried her ashes carefully in the garden of Government House.

Aboriginal women continued fishing the waters of Sydney Harbour at least until the late 1820s. Forty years after the First Fleet arrived, you could still see their canoes skimming the waves, little plumes of smoke rising from the onboard fires.

We celebrate our harbours and coastlines in poetry, prose and art, in sculptures by the sea. But where in Sydney Harbour, our paradise of waters, are the great Eora fisherwomen remembered?

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